

Exceptional People

Lupus is a robber of health, relationships, jobs, finances. But what lupus cannot steal is the will to live and the decision to make something of that life. In this new feature, we want to introduce you to people with lupus who have distinguished themselves by showing strength in the face of adversity and belief in the power of their dreams. As each of us strives to reach our own goals, let us think of them and take pride in their courage.

A Champion in So Many Ways

In 1991, Jodi Norton was spending her senior year of high school in Florida, training with the highly-acclaimed Orlando Diving Team. It was the kind of hard work she expected, so she didn't complain of the fatigue, or the muscle aches, or the dizziness.

By the next year—her first at the University of Arizona—she was getting sick a lot. She started missing diving practice. By the time she transferred to Columbia University, as a pre-med student, she was missing both classes and practice. She was diagnosed with lupus in 1994. But giving up was like giving in to lupus, and that's not Jodi's way.

She found out everything she could about lupus, then went to her diving coach and talked about her desire to compete, and the chronic illness that sometime prevented her from doing her best.

"Jodi was a coach and teacher to me about lupus, and about how much she could do," Coach Gordon Spencer says. "When I started coaching her I didn't have any idea what I was dealing with. Then one day I saw her fingertips sweating, and the lupus became very real."

Over the next several years, Jodi's diving and school work were interrupted time after time by trips to the hospital; yet she qualified for the 1995-96 Eastern College Athletic Conference (ECAC) diving championship. At the end of the first day of the meet, she was in the emergency room, receiving



Jodi Norton, reverse dive straight off the 10 meter platform, University of Arizona in Tucson, 1995-96 season.

intravenous medication for swollen tissue around her brain. She came back the next day to place 10th overall for the season.

So, it is fitting that Jodi's "courage and leadership in overcoming the limitations of lupus" were recognized when she received the ECAC Award of Valor in 1996. She also was presented Sport in Society's "Giant Steps Award" in 1997 at a White House ceremony, in recognition of her "determination to overcome a life-threatening disease and still compete as a champion diver."

To share her experiences Jodi talks to medical students about her condition and makes hospital visits to children who have undergone chemotherapy. She also has been asked to speak on a panel about career transitions for athletes. Jodi will graduate from Columbia this year with a 3.7 G.P.A. and currently is applying to medical schools.

"I have my own file on Jodi Norton," says Coach Spencer. "The things she's done and recovered from—it's just amazing. She's a beautiful diver, and a really courageous person."

