

LIVING WITH CFS

BEN CRICHTON

A Young Man's Story

A sore throat, fatigue, weakness, low-grade fever, allergies and brain fog began assaulting Ben Crichton when he was 16 or 17, before he had accumulated enough life experience to wonder if just maybe he knew more about his own body than the pediatrician he'd been going to all his life.

"I kept going to him, telling him I wasn't feeling well," says Ben, now 27. "It was the same old story. He couldn't find anything. He just kept throwing his hands up in the air and saying 'it's all in your head.' He didn't use those same words, but that's what he meant. I'd leave the office and think, 'I guess I'm okay,'" Ben recalls.

But he wasn't. He became so incapacitated he spent long hours in bed or on the couch, "literally not being able to move" because of flu-like symptoms and crushing fatigue. His parents finally decided to take him to a well-respected internist, who ran every conceivable test before reaching a diagnosis.

"That was the first time I'd ever heard the words chronic fatigue syndrome," Ben says. His first question to the doctor was, "Do I just take some medicine or something?"

If only it were so simple, he realizes now. The life Ben had previously enjoyed quickly became a memory. Fast food, hanging out with friends, partying, dating, playing sports—all the things our society associates with young men—were beyond his capabilities. At the tender age of 18, he lived more conservatively than most senior citizens, expending the barest minimum of energy.

The life Ben had previously enjoyed quickly became a memory. Fast food, hanging out with friends, partying, dating, playing sports—all the things our society associates with young men—were beyond his capabilities. At the tender age of 18, he lived more conservatively than most senior citizens . . .

He tried to go to Indiana University, but says he "eventually got too sick and had to come home." What Ben lacked in physical stamina, he made up for in sheer determination. Finishing college was paramount, despite the opposing message his body sent him. He enrolled at Marquette University in Milwaukee, where he could live at home, taking two "very easy" classes. If he wasn't in class, he was in bed resting or doing a

schedule of light exercise that consisted mostly of stretching.

"My whole life was built around this goal of being as healthy and strong as I could to get through college," he says.

His second year of college brought a breakthrough: acupuncture. "I think acupuncture really helped a lot," he says. "It was the one thing I could feel a difference from using. It was a major part of helping me reach another level of health."

Feeling better meant he could take more than two courses, but he still couldn't enjoy a college student's social life. He remembers feeling lonely, but his entire focus was on getting a degree, on his regimen of exercise and rest, and on forcing himself to get off the couch or out of bed to go to class.

Earning his degree at age 23 "was one of the biggest accomplishments of my life. I cherish my college diploma to this day," Ben says.

Ben now works part-time at his family's business, Shoreline Real Estate Company, and lives a block from work, allowing him to "get to bed easily" if he needs to. On good weeks, he manages to work 30 hours. On bad weeks, perhaps 10.

He's thankful for his family's resources and wonders how those less fortunate cope with CFS. "I couldn't work for a regular company," he says. "There are some days I'm too sick to work. It's been a complete blessing. I work for my dad, so if I'm too sick to go to work, I'm not going to get fired."

Ben has completed the goals he set for himself at this point in his life and feels on par with his peers. "I've had some personal success, some financial success. On paper, I'm the same as everybody else," he says. And that's important to him.

"I'd say the next chapter—being 27 and looking at the next 10 years of my life—I'd like to get married and have a family, be healthier," Ben says. And then he reconsiders. "Or be completely cured."

