

March 20, 2010

This past October, my sister, Caitlin Bazinet and I traveled to Galveston, Tx to attend the World Burn Congress. We were able to attend because of the amazing generosity of the Portland Burn Foundation. Rico and the board of the Portland Burn Foundation have been with our family since Caitlin's horrific accident in December of 2008 and continue to be with us on our lifetime journey of healing.

When we were asked if we were interested in attending World Burn, I was hesitant. I figured that Caitlin would not want to go as she does NOT like to fly and, in the past, didn't want to be with other burn survivors. I wasn't sure if I could leave my three young children for a week, not knowing what I would do for childcare; how I could afford the trip and if it was really necessary for me to attend.

I asked Caitlin if she'd be interested, assuming she'd say "no." She surprised me by saying "yes" and was even excited at the prospect of traveling to Texas. I told her that I wasn't sure how much the trip would cost, knowing that we would get some assistance from the Portland Burn Foundation, but not really knowing how much. I explained that my being able to go was dependant upon how much financial assistance we could get, that I could not afford to go otherwise.

As it turned out, the Portland Burn Foundation funded most of our trip. We also received a generous donation from a long-time Shriner and burn survivor from New Hampshire as well as money from a fundraiser done on Caitlin behalf by the Kora Shriners of Maine. Because of these donors, we were able to make the trip.

If someone had told me that our lives would be transformed at World Burn, I would have laughed. How in the world could MY life be changed by attending a conference focused on burn survivors? I knew it would be transformational for Caitlin, but really had no idea of just how much this experience would impact her.

Our first moment of transformation took place when we landed in Texas. Caitlin was terrified of flying and, only when we landed, did she believe that she would live through the experience.

Our next moment came during one of our disagreements. Caitlin and I tend to be very strong willed. She didn't want to participate in some of the things that I thought were important for her to experience. We stepped off an elevator having just finished yelling at one another. We were greeted by Gary, who we referred to as our "angel" for the rest of the trip.

Gary was able to help Caitlin realize that she was okay. That this was about her and her healing and that she could get from this whatever she needed. Gary helped me realize that this wasn't about me. That this trip was about Caitlin and what she needed. I could have my own expectations, but that it wasn't Caitlin's responsibility to live up to them. I needed to take care of ME and just help her when she asked me to.

This message enabled me to experience the conference for me and for Caitlin to have her own, amazing experience.

Caitlin participated in the Young Adults segment of the conference. She was introduced to other people her age who had suffered burn injuries. Her first observation was that she was much “better off” than most of them. Caitlin hadn’t suffered any facial burns and her scars can be hidden, for the most part. Her peers were quite visibly scarred, many of them having quite severe head and facial scarring. The ironic thing was that they felt the same way...they all felt lucky to have their limbs and empathized with Caitlin because she has bi-lateral below the knee amputations and no hands to speak of.

Caitlin quickly made friends with most of the young adults in the program. I found myself on the outside looking in...uncomfortable at first, but then realized just how incredible this experience was for both of us. For her to be completely independent since her accident was so transformative for her. She could rely on her new-found friends...they understood her needs and WANTED to help her because they liked her, not because they felt badly for her.

Caitlin’s next transformative moment was trusting herself and her friends in the pool.

Caitlin grew up on a lake. She was always the first one in the lake as soon as the ice went out. She loved the water. She had tried swimming once since her accident. It was devastating to her to realize that she could not swim. With no feet and no hands, she felt unsafe. She didn’t have anyone to help her and felt very defeated.

All of her new friends were swimming. They kept asking her to come in and she said, “no.” She was adamant that she was NOT going in the water. She didn’t have a bathing suit. She couldn’t swim. No way.

The evening that Caitlin went swimming I cried. I sat by the edge of the pool and cried tears of happiness. To see her completely trusting her friends to help her was amazing. Caitlin does not trust easily. These people had shown her that it was okay to trust them, that they wouldn’t let her down. They would not let anything happen to her. She started in the hot tub and then moved into the larger pool, hanging tightly onto her friends while they swam her around the pool.

It was then and only then that I realized that Caitlin was going to be okay. I realized that these people would be with her through anything, no matter what. I realized that this trip was priceless. There was no amount of money in the world that could have bought the peace and happiness and sense of true belonging that she was feeling. No matter how many times I said, “I understand,” it meant nothing in the face of having these people around who truly DID understand.

The night before we left was extremely hard for both of us. I was feeling sad for Caitlin that she was having to say goodbye to these new friends. She was devastated that she had to leave these people she had discovered...the only people that she had felt “normal” with since her accident.

We've been home for months now. The first few months were very intense for Caitlin, talking on the phone through the nights, dreaming about and wanting to be with her friends again. It was hard to adjust back to her "old life."

Caitlin clings to the memory and knowledge that there is a world out there with people that do understand, that can help and support us. She looks forward to this year's World Burn Congress in Cincinnati and I look forward to watching her continued growth.

Thank you, Portland Burn Foundation, for giving us the gift of the World Burn Congress. Caitlin has finally begun to see who she really is and to start to feel truly alive again.

-Leslie Beattie