“Plastic Palace”

By Mia Rodriguez

“You’re not broken, you’re bent,” read the words framed on the office wall. Plastic molds of strangers’ torsos sat along the granite counter, staring back at me with their worn-out straps and screws. They were ghosts of people’s past, each holding a story I'll never know. When diagnosed with prominent scoliosis, you do one of two things: get surgery and live with a metal rod in your back for the rest of your life, or wear a back brace; a plastic mold of your torso adjusted to fix the curves in your spine. Each piece of plastic is a patient’s customized treatment, with unique curves and indents.

In a cold office on a snowy evening in December, eight-year-old me was sitting with my Mom, anxiously waiting to hear what my fate would be. I tensed up as I heard footsteps approaching the door. With each passing second, all hope I had built up disappeared. The moment the doctor entered the room, I read his face and felt my heart sink. As he started explaining the X-ray results, I started to doze off. It felt like an out of body experience, watching the doctor talk softly and sympathetically to me, trying to sugarcoat the reality I now had to deal with. When the doctor showed my Mom and I the results, all I saw were twists and curves. The doctor decided that a back brace would be the best course of action. A mold of my torso was made and was then adjusted to counterpush my curves in the opposite direction. It was almost like a corset, with Velcro straps to secure it. I was assigned to wear it at least 20 hours a day. How was I supposed to have a normal childhood while wearing some plastic corset for 83% of the day?

I went through my elementary, middle, and high school years constantly feeling restricted: watching my friends run around during gym class while I sat in the nurse’s office, having to limit the amount of ballet classes I could take based on my wear time, spending my days at amusement parks watching the rides but never being able to ride them. This back brace made me feel like a prisoner to scoliosis, and I often referred to it as my plastic cage. This cage was my assigned jail cell, a chamber coated in plaster, with a small window where I could watch other kids my age be able to do physical activities for hours on end. My brain often wandered off to this plastic jail, with its Velcro floors and locked windows. Everything was stripped of color and warmth.

I was heavily bullied and made fun of for wearing a brace and had a hard time making friends throughout elementary and middle school. In the shackles of my mind, I would watch people peer in with their cold gaze through the locked windows; instead of sunshine, rays of judgment and ridicule shone on me, with no curtain to protect myself. “Why me?” would run through my mind constantly. Late nights were spent tossing and turning, trying to find a position I can find comfort in. I often spent my time feeling alone, knowing no one around me could relate to what I was going through. I constantly thought to myself, *if scoliosis was a person, I’d totally sock them in the face.*

Each doctor visit would break my heart more and more. Each time it was like a broken record: “Good job! Keep wearing it until next time.” The same thing was said year after year after year. Fast forward to 14 years old, and I’m at my checkup appointment, ready to hear, “Nope, keep trying! Come back next year!” However, this time the doctor went off script, showed me the x-ray, and presented a spine with a mild curve at most. I vividly remember feeling shocked and in denial at the progress. The doctor smiled and congratulated me on my advancement and reduced my wear time from 17 to 8 hours a day.

After the appointment, I made a realization that has stuck with me since then and has changed my perspective on everything around me. I was so focused on the negative, the wear time, long hours and discomfort, that I didn’t take a moment to realize the progress I’d been making. Hanging on and pushing through was instilled in me so early on in life because of the hours of discomfort I would put myself through for progress towards a better quality of life. This was a complete turnaround not only in my treatment progress but in my personal life.

When I turned 15, I was old enough to help out at the scoliosis clinic. I helped make back braces and gave advice to patients on brace wear. I learned the biomechanics behind the spine and was intrigued to learn more. My passion for medicine arose and led me to finding the career path I want to pursue. I am now studying on the pre-med track to become a neurosurgeon, specializing in spinal surgeries. I want to work to improve minimally invasive procedures on the spine, including ones that fix scoliosis.

So, for the next few years, I focused on finishing up my treatment and brace wear hours. My plastic cage became my plastic palace, where the windows were open and the door was unlocked; it was no longer cold but warm and filled with vibrant colors. After finishing my treatment, I still find myself going back to the clinic to help the staff and be a supportive figure for current patients. Scoliosis has played a key role in my personal growth, establishing lifelong skills, and leading the way to my passion and love for medicine. Now and then I think back to what I felt before, and if scoliosis was a person, I’d thank them for coming into my life.