Savannah Gray

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Taking the Die Out of Diabetes

Marissa Liantonio sits up in her bed at the behest of a familiar beep. It’s 12:40 a.m., and Marissa’s attached glucose monitor has signaled her blood sugar is too low.

The LED screen on her glucose monitor displays 55, and Marissa instantly knows she needs sugar. She grabs a Juicy Juice box drink off her nightstand and finishes it before falling back to sleep.

Marissa was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at age 18. She is now 22, a graduate of Louisiana State University and dealing with her condition on a daily basis.

According to Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation (JDRF), as many as 3 million Americans have Type 1 diabetes. JDRF estimates 80 Americans are diagnosed each day.

Type 1 diabetes is the result of insulin no longer being produced by a person’s pancreas. Insulin is essential for people to metabolize energy from food.

Although research on Type 1 diabetes is advancing, a cure has yet to be found.

When Marissa was diagnosed, she said she was in shock and confused. Although her grandfather has Type 1 diabetes, Marissa could not understand why or how she got the disease.

Marissa’s sister, Gianna Liantonio, said she handled Marissa’s diagnosis worse than Marissa did.

“I was an emotional wreck at first,” Gianna said. “Marissa stayed strong, but her diagnosis really challenged my emotions. I tried to help and be assisting, but whenever Marissa got frustrated, it was hard for me to not tear up.”

A small smile appeared on Gianna’s face as she explained she is much better at dealing with Marissa’s disease today.

Gianna laughed, and said whenever Marissa’s blood sugar drops she is there to offer Marissa some candy.

Marissa’s parents were also as shocked as Gianna and Marissa. Immediately after her diagnosis, Marissa’s mom started buying sugar-free snacks and drinks believing these were the best options for Marissa.

However, living with diabetes for over three years has taught Marissa and her family that consuming too much artificial sweetener is bad for your health.

“All of our lifestyles have changed for the better in that we are simply more aware of what we put in our bodies,” Marissa said. “I have to count carbohydrates and watch my portion control, so in turn, my family usually does the same.”

If people with Type 1 diabetes do not take care of themselves by watching what they eat and monitoring their glucose levels, they run the risk of experiencing kidney failure, nerve damage, blindness, loss of a limb or even death.

Even though a cure has not been found, Marissa is appreciative for the advanced technology offered today.

Marissa’s grandfather had multiple complications due to his Type 1 diabetes; he lost a limb and his eyesight.

“It is totally different to be diagnosed with diabetes now than it was when he was diagnosed,” Marissa said. “Synthetic insulin wasn’t invented until 1922. If you were diagnosed before that time diabetes was a death sentence. It is so overwhelming to think that my now manageable disease used to be so dangerous.”

Marissa has a daily routine by which she manages her diabetes. First, she pricks her finger for blood three to four times a day to measure her blood-glucose level. Next, she achieves the balance of insulin she needs through the pump she wears all day. Lastly, she counts carbohydrates and tries to exercise regularly.

Although Marissa said she monitors her diabetes closely, living with diabetes is still scary for her.

“The hardest part is the unknown,” Marissa said. “Even if I exercise and eat really well I could still have a high blood sugar, which can ultimately cause complications.”

During her time at LSU, Marissa was a member of numerous clubs and was a vice president for Delta Gamma sorority for two years.

Marissa is used to holding leadership positions and taking charge of situations. Therefore, Marissa said she struggles with not being able to take charge of her body.

“I am very much a control freak, so it’s very hard for me to accept that I can’t always control my sugars,” Marissa said.

Although Marissa can get aggravated when she struggles to manage her sugars, Marissa said she strives to live optimistically.

“In the grand scheme of life, diabetes is a manageable disease, and I can live with it. Not every chronic disease is like that, obviously,” Marissa said. “The complications of Type 1 diabetes are real and scary, but keeping a positive attitude makes my disease not so hard.”

Some people might think a disease like diabetes brings more negative than positive; however, this is not the case with Marissa.

“Diabetes changed my life for the better,” Marissa said. “I am so passionate about living a healthy lifestyle with this disease.”

Marissa said having diabetes has also inspired her career choice. She believes if it were not for her diagnosis she would have made the wrong career decision.

Marissa wants to be a registered nurse and a certified diabetic educator. With this career, Marissa will work with newly diagnosed patients to help them manage their diabetes and find a routine that fits their lifestyle.

She also wants to start a community outreach program through which she would educate the community on diabetes and how to prevent Type 2 diabetes.

Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes are completely different diseases. Researchers have not yet found a cause for Type 1 diabetes.

WebMD states the two main causes for Type 2 diabetes are obesity and a lack of physical activity.

The next step for Marissa is nursing school in New Orleans. After graduating from nursing school, Marissa will take the necessary steps to become a certified diabetic educator.

Although Marissa doesn’t have her certification yet, she’s already touched the lives of recently diagnosed children in New Orleans and Baton Rouge by meeting with them through JDRF.

Marissa said she is excited about what comes next. She looks forward to learning more about her disease and helping others along the way.

“I am so passionate about being an advocate for people with diabetes, and this job is a perfect avenue for that,” Marissa said. “Meeting and connecting with other people with diabetes is always a great experience for me, and having the opportunity to make that my career is simply amazing.”