



2019 HANNAH BERNARD MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP

We are pleased to announce the winner of the 2019 Hannah Bernard Memorial Scholarship

Kaitlyn Brennan from Illinois

We wish Kaitlyn all the best in her academic career. We also sincerely thank everyone who submitted an application and extend our love and gratitude to the Bernard family.



Freshman year, my life as I knew it ceased to exist. Before high school, I was a cheerleader, a musician, an average teenager. One January morning, though, that changed in an instant. I dislocated my knee and never quite recovered.

That afternoon, my mom rushed me to a doctor's appointment, searching for answers to my unexplained dislocation. My doctor quizzically evaluated my joints, manipulating them into positions impossible for the average human; turns out, I am not the average human. He quickly concluded that this was not a case of simple joint laxity, it was something bigger: Ehlers Danlos Syndrome (EDS).

EDS is a rare connective tissue disorder, and as I soon found out, symptoms of EDS often spiral out of control before they stabilize. From that day forward, high school became an uphill battle. Soon after that appointment, every joint in my body began dislocating. I suddenly couldn't hold down food or water. I began presenting with stroke-like symptoms. I lost my hearing. I was overwhelmed by the world of medical chaos stemming from my newfound disability.

Eventually, the avalanche of symptoms subsided, and they began to acquire names. Postural

Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome. Celiac Disease. Hemiplegic Migraines. Myalgic Encephalomyelitis. The ever-growing list. With each diagnosis came new limitations. My POTS put an end to my music career; it lowered my blood pressure to critical levels with each note I played on my clarinet. Cheerleading was out of the question with my increasingly unstable joints. Collectively, though, these conditions culminated to the worst symptom of all: social isolation.

As my list of diagnoses grew, each rarer than the last, I became increasingly more alone. My closest friends called me an attention whore and a liar. Rumors flew around the school. I became “that weird sick girl” nobody would talk to.

After feeling sorry for myself for far too long though, I decided to take speak up and seek out support elsewhere. Instead of wallowing, I began to write articles for The Mighty -- a site empowering those with chronic illness and disability. I became involved in disability rights advocacy and chronic illness awareness. Most importantly, I found a community of people with disabilities who understand my experiences and stand by me unconditionally.

Within school, I joined Best Buddies and started an ASL club. I dedicated myself to breaking down barriers for other students with disabilities. I was appointed to Student Diversity Council to amplify both my personal story and the collective narrative of every medically-complex student at my school. I have continued to advocate tirelessly so that no other student experiences the harassment and isolation I faced.

These last four years have not been easy; yet, I would not trade my illness for the world. It has empowered me, turning me into a writer and activist. It has taught me how quickly circumstances change and the value of every day. It has provided me with an indescribable sense of self – a new identity. And to me, that is priceless.

Despite the strides I have made in overcoming my chronic illness and pain, I acknowledge that college will not be easy. I expect ups and downs, new diagnoses, and some of the most difficult moments with my EDS to occur in the hallowed halls of whichever school I choose to attend. However, I am prepared to continue to fight for my quality of life so that I can further my education and resultantly my advocacy for awareness of chronic illnesses.

In order to do so, though, I must acknowledge not only my health barriers but the monetary obstacles in my way as well. Being chronically ill is expensive, and any amount of scholarship is needed -- it could mean the difference between tuition and medication for a month. My family is prepared to help finance my continued education, but I don't want to limit myself due to the portion of tuition that they cannot cover, which is a large amount. I want to continue to pursue my dreams and attend law school. I aim to curate a disability rights and chronic illness awareness curriculum to be taught in public schools nationwide. I need to further my education in order to refine my voice, enabling me to amplify the narratives of not only myself but others as well.

I know that college is not everything, and this cannot be accomplished inside the classroom. Yet, I am so incredibly fortunate to be stable enough in my health today to even consider college; my doctors never thought I would apply to, let alone attend, college two years ago. So, I refuse to waste the opportunity. I will use my college years to not only maintain a strong GPA and academic standing but to advocate for awareness on campus and get involved with as many activities as I can. If awarded this scholarship, I can eliminate a slight financial barrier and focus my time on these ideas and initiatives. I can research disability rights and awareness. I will be able to work further with US pain foundation to lobby for new forms of pain medication and treatment. I will be able to embody Hannah's legacy as a writer and activist.

I truly hope that in your consideration of my application, you will take into account my pure passion for my continued educational and activist pursuits. I want to change the way the world views chronic illness and pain and that starts with my next four years.

I will be attending Columbia University (in NYC) next year for a double major in political science-economics and sustainable development with a pre-law track. I am hoping to go to law school for human rights law! :)