

Growing up, my brothers knew which hospitals had the best playgrounds. Scottish Rite had the best slides, Baylor had the best monkey bars, Children's had the best games. They loved going to new specialists, because it meant new hospitals and new playgrounds. It made me sad for them.

I was born with a rare genetic condition, cladiocranial dysplasia – CCD for short. Doctors' appointments were the norm for my family. A doctor prodding me, a nurse poking me, med students vying for a look at me; my childhood dissolved into one long doctor's visit. I hated the smell of disinfectant, the way latex gloves felt, the way needles pinched and bruised. I hated the surgeries that were so painful and required monthly follow-ups. I hated my "normal".

Family vacations were used to go see specialists. Instead of going to Disney World, we were going to Houston to participate in gene studies. Instead of riding roller coasters, we were having our heads scanned with a 3D printer and having blood drawn to figure out why. But there was never a real answer, just more questions.

CCD made me grow extra teeth, like a shark. My dad would call me the Amazing Mutant Shark Girl. I had to have surgery every summer from the ages of thirteen to seventeen. All of my baby teeth had to be pulled. All the extra shark teeth had to be removed. And I spent the next four years having my adult teeth pulled in with a painful system of chains and anchors. My face was constantly swollen, my lips torn up by the mouthful of metal. Classmates would throw change at me, and call me a sideshow freak. It hurt to eat and to talk and to smile. I decided I wouldn't talk or smile again.

It took me years to be okay with smiling. It took a bit longer to be okay with talking. I still have nightmares where all of my teeth are gone, and I wake up with my mouth tasting of blood and metal.

I work in the heart of the medical district now, surrounded by the very hospitals that shaped my childhood. I can see UT Southwestern from my building, and my bus goes past Children's every morning. I see doctors and nurses heading to work and instead of anger, I'm filled with gratitude. I'm grateful to be able to eat real food, and to be able to talk to my students. And I'm so grateful to be able to smile.

Not too long ago, one of my brothers and I drove past Scottish Rite.

"Do you remember those slides?" he asked excitedly. "Man, we had so much fun there!"

"Yeah, we did, didn't we?"