

2017

## Honorable Mention - ENGL 1000 Literacy Autobiography Contest - 2017

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### Recommended Citation

Andriano, Cameron, "Honorable Mention - ENGL 1000 Literacy Autobiography Contest - 2017" (2017). *ENGL 1000 Writing Studies 1 Literacy Autobiography Contest*. 4.

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Cameron Andriano

Professor Laura White

When I sat down to write this essay for my English 1000 class, I just allowed the words flow from a place deep inside of me. For me, this was an emotional, honest statement about a concussion I received in December of last year and my resulting challenges. It's a kind of revealing of one of my biggest secrets. I experienced no problem in writing the whole essay in one sitting, and then sculpting it into a first draft in another sitting. Next, I asked an honors Writing Studies peer from our classroom to read it. She helped me to make a few revisions concerning sentence flow and word choice before I turned it into my professor for grading. When discussing my essay with my professor, she urged me to enter it into this contest. She encouraged me to rearrange some sentences and make some additional revisions as well. Finally, I consulted a high school English teacher and one of my classmates to assist me in making final revisions. This is the result.

## Losing What We Really Take for Granted; Language.

“Cami are you okay? Cami? Cami!!!”

The gym flashed before my eyes. My legs gave out underneath me and I fell to the floor, passed out cold. And for a few seconds, every light in my world was turned off. A plug pulled.

The last thing I could remember was holding my flyer in the air with my stunt group. Arms strong, extended, tight, connected. It was just another day in the life of a cheerleader. But somehow, this time was different. When my flyer came down, instead of doing a perfect spiral spin into the safety of my arms, she had her elbows straight out, and one had connected with my temple. I can't remember a single thing after that. I have been a cheerleader for 11 of the 18 years of my life. I have never broken my arm, never had to go to the emergency room, never lost any of my teeth, but that day I lost something I could have never imagined losing.

I lost my ability to speak, read, understand, and remember things as I once had. My whole life I had grown up in a family of educators. My mom had a master's degree in English, and she taught AP classes at a local high school. Naturally, I took after her. We loved to read together before bed, even until I was a 6<sup>th</sup> grader. I would sit next to her, propped up on a pillow, and she would bring the words to life. She was a skilled painter; creating pictures in my head effortlessly as she read aloud. She taught me practically every word I knew, alongside my dad. My dad was a respected principal in our town, and there was no better feeling than making him proud. He was the kind of person that made you want success so badly that you had no choice but to give it everything you had. With my mom as my teacher and my dad as my coach, my life was deeply rooted in school and sports. Being academically ahead of the game and physically a beast, I whizzed my way through school.

When it came to academics, I had no problems of any kind. I remember feeling confident in myself and my abilities. Speaking or reading aloud in class was fun for me. Every year when school started, each class would pick a student to represent them in the school's student council. That selected student had to give a speech to the class to establish his or her worthiness in order to prove (of course) that the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade mind had the ability to function and make very important political decisions on behalf of your class. I would proudly give my speech, gloating that I didn't even have to read off of a notecard, since I had memorized the whole thing. I had cheered in front of huge booming crowds, countless judges, coaches, and classmates. When I was 13, I gave a speech to the entire student body with ease. 300 people *at least* tuned into what I had to say. I loved talking aloud to anyone who would listen. I could talk for hours and hours until my mouth went as dry as the Sahara. My coach used to joke that she couldn't have paid me to stop chatting all the time. But after my concussion, all the money in the world couldn't have made me talk.

"Concussive symptoms." The trainer in training, an intern you could say, had come down to check out how badly I was injured. Our full time trainer was on vacation, so her amateur skill set would have to do for now. Without my knowledge, my mother had come to the school to drive me home. I wasn't capable. Words swam through my head meaninglessly. Lights and sounds seemed so foreign, so far away from where I was. I was watching the trainer talk to me, the words leaving her mouth, but I couldn't bring myself to recall a single thing she said. I just couldn't remember. "Can you repeat these numbers back to me? What day is it? Can you balance on one leg?" The words poured sloppily out of my mouth. I stumbled, tripped, fell over them. I kept telling myself that I was just tired, I needed to go to bed. "She's pretty shaken up, but nothing too serious. She has concussive symptoms but just take it easy on her tonight and see how it goes." Everyone thought things would be better the next day, if not back to normal. I

would return to practice and be able to compete in my first competition as a Senior at the end of that week, right? But everyone was wrong, God, they were so wrong.

The next day I drove to school, though I don't remember actively doing so. It seemed like everyone around me was screaming. A locker door shut near me that sounded so much like a bomb, I ducked to the ground and ran to the nurse's office. I was desperate for silence. "What's going on? Are you okay?" I tried to answer, but I stammered. I could feel myself stuttering, but I couldn't stop it. Hot salty tears poured from my eyes as I struggled from one word to the next. Confusion, anger, and frustration washed over me like a tidal wave. I didn't know what to do. It felt like no one did.

For the next 2 months, I stuttered when speaking. I became quiet and closed off. The girl who was once so bubbly could now barely recite a sentence. Speaking and reading aloud became an embarrassing ordeal that I avoided at all costs. Homework was a war that I felt I would never conquer. Reading exhausted me and gave me splitting headaches. It felt as though I was constantly looking for a word or a phrase that I could not remember. I could feel the words on the tip of my tongue, but it might as well have fallen off. I was searching through my own brain and memory trying so hard to find even a familiar corner to begin with. It was a painstaking recovery, but I made small strides. The more rest I got, the better I did. Day by day, increment by increment, I regained my ability to talk without stuttering. Reading and doing homework got easier and eventually almost felt normal again. I found myself relearning words and their meanings and appreciating them. How silly I was to take all this language for granted! I started to rebuild my vocabulary slowly, then all at once. I immersed myself in reading and writing and found great joy in losing myself in a good book. I could communicate with my friends, family, and teachers again. I could get my point across and even prove my point, if and when I needed

to. Losing the ability to speak and read at once gave me a new appreciation for communication that I had taken for granted for too long.

After realizing how much I struggled, I decided I wanted to help people who had gone through situations like mine. Now I am at Governors State University, studying to be a speech pathologist or an interpreter for the deaf. My language barrier may have been hard to deal with, but I am thankful for the impact it has had on my life. It has led me to the light at the end of the tunnel. It has led me to find what I really want to be in life. I cannot wait to continue my journey with language while also helping others overcome their own struggles.