



Photo courtesy of Jodi Norton

## Visualizing the Dive

by Jan Henrikson

**Jodi Norton dives from the 10-meter platform at the University of Arizona**

**J**odi Norton should have been nestled in bed, dreaming of the perfect dives she'd perform the next day at a college competition. Instead, she was rushed to the emergency room at 3 a.m. with swelling around the brain tissue — encephalitis. That didn't stop her, however, from diving just hours later and placing in the top 10 at the Eastern Collegiate Athletic Diving Championship.

People were astonished. "You haven't been diving. How could you do so well?" they asked her.

"Yes, I am diving. I'm diving in my head," was Norton's answer. "I'm using visualization techniques that I learned for my illness and am applying them to my athletics."

An Olympic-caliber diver for Columbia University, Norton had missed much of the 1995-1996 season, enduring the ravages of systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), an incurable, noncontagious autoimmune disease. It was SLE that had made her susceptible to encephalitis.

"Every day when I would normally practice, I would visualize myself diving — and doing all the dives correctly," she recalls. "Diving is such a mental sport. You have to be mentally tough. It's so precise. It's not like swimming, where if you're a little off, you swim a little slower. If you're a little off in diving, you hit the diving board. There are huge consequences."

Lupus is even more demanding, exacting huge consequences unless you slow down and listen to the needs of your body. Norton, who maintained a 3.7 GPA at Columbia as a pre-med student major-

ing in psychology, had to take medical leave twice before receiving her degree in 1999. She was then accepted to the post-baccalaureate pre-med program at Bryn Mawr, but again, illness forced her to postpone her studies.

"I'm the kind of person...I always go out there when I say I'll do it," explains Norton. "It may take me longer, but I say, 'I've got to do something with my life. If I can't go to school, then I'm going to be damned if I can't help other people.' I figure eventually it will be my turn."

That spirit is the cornerstone of the Lupus Inspiration Foundation for Excellence, (LIFE), a nonprofit organization founded by Norton and former classmate Adina Gravit. As far as Norton knows, LIFE is the only charitable organization that awards merit-based scholarships to full-time and part-time college students with SLE who embody courage, strength and perseverance in their lives.

"Everyone thought we were crazy," says Norton. "How could two undergrads have enough motivation and determination to start a national nonprofit organization?" She and Gravit, who has a history of autoimmune disease in her family, came up with the idea while talking about the financial burdens faced by students with lupus. Most scholarships and financial aid programs are for full-time students, whereas the person with lupus often has to overcome overwhelming obstacles to manage even part-time classes.

A brainstorming session clarified their focus — they would award scholarships! But the typical scholarship was in



Adina Gravit & Jodi Norton Co-Founders

## The Heart Of The Matter

memory of someone. "Memorial — No! We're thinking Life!" says Norton. "This scholarship represents my life, not my memorial. The L period, I period, F period, E period means that life stands for something."

In 2001, LIFE's first year, they raised over \$7,000 and awarded five college scholarships all across the country. Every January and August since then, they've given scholarships to qualified applicants.

Cristen Wetherbee is one of LIFE's scholarship recipients, fulfilling all the requirements: earning a minimum of six credits toward a graduate or undergraduate degree with a GPA of 3.0 or higher, participation in at least one extracurricular activity and submission of an original essay, "How Lupus Has Affected My Life."

She wrote: "Imagine if you will, a young eagle flying confidently through the sky, soaring high and doing wild tricks," writes Wetherbee in her essay. "Suddenly a storm arises; the eagle is struck by lightning and falls to the ground. It is badly shaken, but, after much crawling around, decides to try flying once again. This time the eagle flies slower and not quite as high, but he flies with a new purpose, grateful to be alive. I was this eagle during the sophomore year of my college career. I was confident, outgoing, strong and a bit arrogant. Then, I was struck with lupus. Just like the eagle, I was devastated and depressed, but soon lupus began to change my life. Lupus became my teacher, my open door and my charge to live a new existence."

LIFE is dedicated to keeping that door open for people with lupus. In addition to providing supplemental educational support, they are earnestly promoting awareness about the disease.

Norton still encounters people who have never heard of it. When a reporter stopped her after a meet to ask her who her toughest competitor was, Norton replied without hesitation, "Lupus."

"Lupus?" The reporter puzzled, apparently searching for the diver with

that name.

Out of 1,000 adults surveyed in a national poll for the Lupus Foundation of America, 38 percent said they are somewhat or very familiar with lupus, 39 percent have only heard the disease's name and 22 percent have never heard of lupus.

"No one even realizes how devastating lupus can be," says Norton. Difficult to diagnose, (Norton's own symptoms were dismissed as overtraining, for years), SLE affects 40 million Americans. Six million die from complications of lupus every year.

"It hasn't received governmental funding," she continues. "Nothing like AIDS or cancer or MS or cystic fibrosis, all those things that occur in such a smaller percentage in our population. I thought about it. If you look at it, what has the government over the years not had enough funding for? Women's diseases for one. Ninety percent of those diagnosed with systemic lupus are female. No. 2...diseases of [the] minority. The most common person to get it is a female Native American. Hispanics and African-Americans have a much higher degree of lupus than Caucasians."

Still, Norton is fortified by an optimistic spirit. "People look at me and say that I always see the silver lining," she says. "It doesn't matter how many people tell me I can't do it because it hasn't been done. That gives me incentive. I couldn't do it alone, though. I've got a wonderful mother who's very supportive. I'm fortunate to have people around me who love me and encourage me to follow my dreams."

For a scholarship application or to make a donation, contact: Lupus Inspiration Foundation For Excellence (LIFE), P.O. Box 64088, Tucson, AZ 85728-4088; e-mail: [life4lupus@hotmail.com](mailto:life4lupus@hotmail.com) or [www.lifescholarship.org](http://www.lifescholarship.org).  
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