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My New Life*by Lauren Baxter*

I wasn't always disabled. I was your classic "wild child", skimming through life and taking it all for granted. Then one afternoon in late June of 1991 at the age of seventeen, I suffered a devastating brain stem stroke. The stroke left me quadriplegic with no speech. When it first hit me that I would probably be disabled for the rest of my life, I was consumed with anger. Fourteen years later, I now see my disability as a blessing. I wouldn't change all the memories and growing experiences for anything. I have grown more mentally, emotionally and spiritually than I could have ever imagined.

My first residence at a rehabilitation center was a lonely time. I moved there immediately following a two and a half month stay at a nearby hospital. Just as I began to show slight improvement, my insurance expired and I was sent home.

Time seemed to creep by and depression and hopelessness overwhelmed me. For the second time, I moved to a center. There I was taught to operate my first power wheelchair. Having that little bit of control lifted my spirits immensely.

I later moved into another nursing home. I felt alone and neglected there. The case worker then introduced me to a specialist who worked with augmentative communication. I was trained and eventually received my own augmentative communication device. Now, not only could I express my thoughts and feelings, but I could control the television. To this day, it remains to be my lifeline. After moving to yet another location, I enrolled in a college course two nights a week. My communication device plays a crucial role in my studies. I am able to type and print out my answers to my professors' questions. Once again, I am able to freely join in with class discussions through my voice output communication aid. Finally, my life was looking up and I once again enjoyed just being alive.

Eventually, I moved into my own apartment and I'm inspired to find my own house. I successfully completed another college course and am determined to continue with my college classes. My ultimate dream is to receive a degree in English and use the knowledge I acquire to become a successful author.

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