

Still Dancing: Overcoming MS to Become an Atlanta Falcons Cheerleader



My MS journey started when I was a freshman at the College of Charleston. I remember I was unpacking and getting things settled in my dorm room when I experienced this weird sensation on the left side of my body. It felt like if you've sat on your leg or something for a long time and you get up and it's a little numb. It was like that, but a little different.

I'd never felt that before, but at the same time, I knew I was in a new environment and feeling a mix of anxiety and excitement. I didn't really think anything was wrong until it lasted for a few days.

I decided to go to my campus doctor just to get checked out. The doctor told me it might be nerves and anxiousness. He said if I still had symptoms in the next few days to go to the hospital. But by the end of that week, it just kind of went away.

Fast forward to my junior year. I was a healthy 20-year-old on the College of Charleston Dance Team. Then I noticed that same sensation on the left side of my body again and I was like, hmm, this is familiar. Should I be concerned? Should I just wait it out? I didn't think too much about it and waited about a week, just kind of hoping that would go away on its own again.

But this time, it progressed. It started to affect my vision. I was seeing double of everything. And that's when I really got concerned.

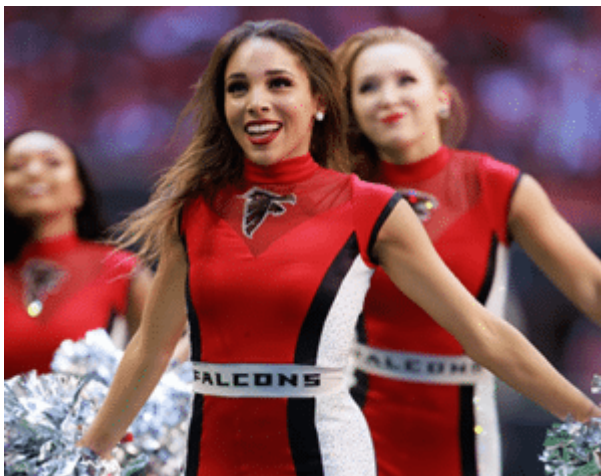
My best friend, Tiffany, took me to the ER, but it was during COVID, so she wasn't able to come in with me. I'll never forget sitting all by myself in my tiny little ER room. After describing my symptoms to the doctor, I had an MRI. Then there was a lot of waiting. And then the doctor finally came back in. He said that they did find a lesion on my brain. And he said he thought it was MS.

Tiffany's mom was diagnosed with MS when we were freshman so I knew what MS was, but I didn't think that could possibly happen to me. No one in my family had MS. I was young and healthy! But it turns out, MS can happen to anyone.

My parents drove up to be with me, and I was lucky enough to get in to see an amazing MS specialist right away. I kept thinking about the 'what ifs.' I asked my doctor, 'what if I can't dance anymore? What if it gets worse?'

My doctor said, "We caught this. With all the things we've learned about MS, you're going to be fine. You're going to be able to dance." It was a scary time for me and my family.

Fast forward to today, I'm on a great treatment plan. And my doctor was right. I haven't stopped dancing. I'm fortunate enough to be in my third season cheering for the Atlanta Falcons.



I definitely have some challenges as a cheerleader when it comes to practicing and the games and standing. I work a full-time job and two nights a week I have practice afterwards so there might be some days where I'm a little more tired and lethargic than others.

But it really depends on the day for me — because most days, I feel great. I feel pretty normal most days. But I also feel like sometimes people don't see me.

I want to educate people that MS doesn't have to look a certain way. A lot of people are like, 'she sounds fine. She looks fine.' They don't really understand everything MS entails.

When I was first diagnosed, I wondered why this happened to me. Now I've become more at peace with it and more thankful that I caught it at the time that I did and that my situation unfolded the way it did — having the neurologist that I have, the support system that I have.

I've accepted this is something that I'm going to be living with for the rest of my life. I may face some challenges. But I'm still able to dance. I'm still able to do what I love. So I'm going to do everything I can to shed light on what this means.