

Wobbling through life



I look at my multiple sclerosis as a gift.

by Sabina Pierce

“Weebles wobble, but they don’t fall down.”

When I was a kid, I had a set of Weebles, which are these egg-shaped toys with faces on them. No matter how hard I tried to knock one over to prove the jingle wrong, it’d snap right back up with a smile on its face.

I’ve walked through life with that jingle as one of my mantras.

It has served me well.

Fresh out of university, excited to be starting as a photojournalist, I woke up at 23 with double vision. A few tests later, I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, a disease that caused my mother to be bedridden in my teens and would force my aunt into disability retirement.

After a good cry, I decided to look at my MS as a gift, a wake-up call. As the poet Mary Oliver wrote, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

I wanted to be a photographer.

I dug in.

Single and self-employed, I knew that if I didn’t work, I wouldn’t eat. I had just started to freelance for the Associated Press, which is a big deal so early in a photographer’s career. I

put an eye patch on, said I had an eye infection and kept on shooting.



Sabina Pierce has photographed for top newspapers. Her subjects include the Dalai Lama, Pope Francis and Barbaro, a famous racehorse. Photo courtesy of Sabina Pierce

Meanwhile, I found a great MS neurologist at the University of Pennsylvania — Dr. Markowitz. He loved photography, so we hit it off. Then I researched MS to come up with a game plan based on common sense, his guidance and research. I changed my diet to an anti-inflammatory diet long before it was mainstream. I exercised regularly back when it was seen as putting stress on your body.

I took allergy pills to keep my immune system quiet. I started rowing to work on my balance. Most importantly, I kept my heart happy by doing what I love and surrounding myself with dogs.

Twenty years later I'm following where my eye has led me. I've photographed for top newspapers, including the New York Times, and took photos behind the scenes with presidents, Pope Francis, the Dalai Lama and Barbaro, a famous racehorse. One photo of him was chosen by Time magazine for its "25 Best Photos of the Year in 2006." I was one of the American Society of Media Photographers' "Top Photographers of 2007." I spent two years in a Philadelphia cop car working on a documentary project.

I traveled across the country shooting pictures of chefs and dogs for a book that was featured on Good Morning America.

All while hiding my MS.

Currently I shoot for Fortune 100 companies along with a bit of photojournalism and personal photo projects. As time passes and my career speaks for itself, I've let clients know that I have MS.

I want them to see that people with MS can still get the job done.

I'm no hero. MS has been challenging. It's knocked me to my knees on occasion, but I feel that by changing my perspective and making the disease my friend and not my foe, I've been able to take control of my story as best as I can.

I am a Weeble, so whenever my MS is acting up, I remind myself that Weebles wobble, but they don't fall down.

Sabina Pierce lives in Philadelphia.

Spring 2020

See more of Sabina Pierce's photography at sabinashoots.com.