

Gabrielle Andrew's Story: *Thriving with Lupus*

by Pat Culpepper

As 2007 drew to a close, Gabrielle Andrews was preparing for her final semester of college when her father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. On March 5, 2008, just five months after receiving the devastating news, Mr. Andrews died. Three short weeks later, Gabrielle's uncle, her dad's brother died suddenly and unexpectedly. Then two months later, in June her paternal grandfather, also sudden and unexpected. These back-to-back losses, heaped one upon the other, left Gabrielle reeling. But somehow, in a thick fog of grief, she managed to complete her college studies that same spring.



Photograph courtesy of Gabrielle Andrews

Just a short time later, in late July Gabrielle began to notice that she felt tired; her hands and feet hurt; her joints and muscles ached. Some said it was to be expected given all that she had been through, so she rested more. But when the heavy fatigue and pain persisted, she saw her primary care doctor. With no answers forthcoming, she carried on the best she could, finding it difficult to get out of bed most days; it hurt even to walk. The persistent fatigue and pain worried her greatly, especially given her father's recent death from cancer and the passing of her uncle and grandfather. These devastating losses had left her feeling insecure and uncertain. Her present unexplained illness only added to her anxiety.

Then in August, tragedy hit again. The family's beloved mountain home was struck by lightning and burned to the ground. Her father had designed and built the home to enjoy in his retirement and had finished it only a few years prior to his death. Its destruction truly added insult to injury, but Gabrielle found it almost insignificant after having lost so many loved ones. "It was just a house," she said.

Gabrielle's debilitating pain and fatigue continued into the fall of 2008, and by October she developed a high fever. She spent more than a week in the hospital before the fever broke. Her doctor ran numerous tests trying to find the cause of her illness. When the tests revealed white and red blood cell counts outside the normal

range, combined with swollen lymph nodes, her doctor suspected cancer and referred her to an oncologist. She recalls being terrified that, like her father, she might also have cancer. When cancer was ruled out, she felt some relief, but she was still sick and unable to work or drive. At the young age of 21, *appearing* healthy and fit, Gabrielle was in tremendous pain and lacked the energy to do more than shower and dress each day. Sometimes even that was a challenge.

After being cleared for cancer, she began seeing a rheumatologist, and lupus was suspected, but not confirmed. Having heard great things about another local rheumatologist, Dr. Annabelle Lee, Gabrielle soon scheduled an appointment with her. They formed an immediate connection, and Dr. Lee took aggressive action, quickly diagnosing Gabrielle's lupus and starting her on prednisone, pregabalin and hydroxychloroquine, drugs commonly used in the treatment of lupus.

Dr. Lee advised Gabrielle that it might take a while for her to see improvement from the medication, and it did. In the months that followed, she continued to feel ill, and she lost about 50% of her hair. Eventually she began water therapy with a group of senior citizens at the local YMCA. She says it was challenging and exhausting, but she made herself do it. By the middle of 2009, she began to notice a slight improvement in her condition, and she was able to start working part-time, off and on as her illness allowed.

Slowly she continued to improve. By the end of 2010, Gabrielle realized she was feeling much better. So much so that she began to consider stepping up her exercise routine. In high school, Gabrielle had played volleyball, softball and tennis, and she missed being active. She had recently heard good things about CrossFit, an exercise program that focuses on a variety of functional movements that can be scaled to suit anyone's fitness level, abilities and limitations. She decided to give it a try, and in early 2011 she joined a local CrossFit gym. She loved it right from the start and quickly caught the attention of her coaches who recognized her potential. Not only is CrossFit a strength and conditioning program that anyone can follow to improve their fitness, it is also one of the fastest growing sports in the world. More and more athletes are seeking out CrossFit for the competitive aspects.

In the fall of 2011, Gabrielle joined Bold City CrossFit in Jacksonville, Florida and began training under the direction of owner/coach Nathan Long. Gabrielle participated in her first CrossFit competition in 2012, competing in the sport's worldwide open event. Her top-60 performance in the Open garnered her an invitation to compete at the Southeast regional competition in May 2012. The regional event is a grueling 3-day competition, and she finished in 18th place. In 2013, Gabrielle bested her 2012 performance, again qualifying during the Open to compete at regionals where she finished in 7th place. Her goal for 2014 is to finish top-3 at regionals and win an invitation to the annual CrossFit Games held each summer in Carson, California.

While CrossFit for general fitness is routinely scaled to suit an individual's unique situation, CrossFit *competition* is a different story. This arduous sport requires intense training year-round. Not surprisingly, Gabrielle's doctor advised against it. Stress is thought to be one of the primary triggers of lupus flares, and CrossFit training delivers considerable stress to the body. Improvement in strength, speed and endurance are realized through cycles of repeated stress and recovery. Gabrielle seriously considered her doctor's advice, but chose to compete anyway. To minimize her risk for flares, she places a heavy emphasis on recovery, eating well, and adequate sleep. And she listens to her body. "As long as God allows me to do this, I'm going to do it. I've never experienced a flare since starting CrossFit; I feel great," said Gabrielle.

Currently Gabrielle's lupus is in a non-active state. She remains on hydroxychloroquine for management of her disease, but she feels generally well. She is grateful to her family, especially her mother, for unwavering support when her illness was at its peak and now as she pursues her athletic goals. Gabrielle also spoke with gratitude about her rheumatologist, Dr. Lee. When asked what she wants to share with others who may be new to lupus, she said, "I want to encourage them that *you can* get better; *you can* find the right doctor, one who understands. *You will* feel better; it may take a while, but do what you can, don't worry about what you can't, give it time, and *you will get better.*"



Photograph courtesy of Gabrielle Andrews