

**S**eventy-two hours. That's how long it took for her life to change. To go from playing volleyball on a Monday night to emergency spinal surgery early Thursday morning.

Seventy-two hours. That's how long it took **Sydney Fowler**, 11, to become paralyzed from the waist down.

What started off as a normal Monday night, quickly turned into the beginning of a series of events that would change her entire outlook on life.

"It started at volleyball practice with heartburn and then it got worse into back pain and body aches at school on Monday," Fowler said. "I ended up leaving school Monday and going home and went to Urgent Care the next morning to see what was going on."

Fowler was originally diagnosed with a lung infection and prescribed an antibiotic, but the pain continued to worsen. When the pain became unbearable, Fowler and her parents, **Jeffrey Fowler** and **Christi Fowler**, decided to go to the emergency room.

"It wasn't a lung infection, but rather a heart infection. Pericarditis," Sydney said. "But the pain got much, much worse and the next morning we went to the pediatrician's office [for pain medication]."

While on their way, Sydney was in agonizing pain and began to notice that her legs were starting to feel fuzzy and lose a lot of strength.

"My spinal cord was in the middle of being severed," Sydney said. "The pain is indescribable."

Stumbling into the office, Sydney fell into the arms of a nurse who helped her back to a room. While there, the feeling she had in her legs began to fade.

"She walked in and very slowly she was no longer moving her foot, and then it progressed to her left leg," Jeffrey said. "But then the right leg started going and eventually she couldn't feel her stomach and it just kept creeping up until it hit her sternum."

It was at this point that Sydney's parents decided to take her to the hospital for help.

"In the matter of two to three hours, I went from fully walking to barely being able to lift up my legs," Sydney said.

After arriving in the hospital, Jeffrey lifted Sydney out of the car, put her into a wheelchair, and she was admitted into a room. Several doctors packed into her room in an effort to diagnose Sydney to uncover the cause of her paralysis.

"They kept bringing in more doctors and eventually there were 30 different ones talking about what was going on because they had never seen anything like that before," Jeffrey said.

"I was trying to stay calm because I couldn't freak out," Sydney said. "If I started freaking out, then everyone else would start freaking out and I didn't want to get in my head, so I just stayed super calm."

Her mother reflected the same persona, but as more doctors arrived into the office, the more worried she became.

"When everything started going sideways with her health, the reaction to her paralysis was pretty traumatic, pretty gut-wrenching," Christi said.

After nearly nine hours at the emergency room, Sydney finally received an MRI. The doctors diagnosed Sydney with a mass, compressing her spinal cord, causing paralysis.

At 3 a.m., they rushed Sydney into emergency surgery.

After the mass was removed, Sydney and her family had awaited the results of the biopsy. The mass had been diagnosed as a growing staph infection. It attached itself to the mid part of her spinal cord and began to compress it, which caused the paralysis.

"I was completely paralyzed by now," Sydney said. "I could feel a little bit, but I couldn't move anything past my sternum."

Sydney went into a second surgery to remove the remaining parts of the

mass on her spinal cord because the doctors had not retrieved as much as they had anticipated.

"The next day, they did another MRI and saw that they didn't get all of it and that it was actually traveling upwards," Christi said. "If it had gone up any farther, she would have lost feeling in her arms, so they had to operate again."

However, the second surgery ended up being more physically tolling on Sydney as she was able to feel more of the pain from surgery. Her family was instructed by doctors to go to Atlanta for the best physical therapy programs.

"We lived in Atlanta for 10 months staying in a Ronald McDonald House going between two hospitals: Sheppard Center and CHOA [Children's Hospital of America]," Jeffrey said.

Two years after recovery, Sydney has now gained back some movement in her torso and worked on her core muscles in order to do tasks such as getting dressed, leaning over to pick something up, crawling, etc. Much of her progress can be credited to intense therapy and strength training.

"It's changed our perspective of what's important and our priorities. We took walking for granted. We use our legs for everything, and so for her to even put her hair up in a ponytail was impossible because she wasn't able to lift her arms up because she had no ab strength," Christi said.

"Never in a million years would I have thought that I was paralyzed," Sydney said. "It wasn't even a thought in my mind."

Sydney is grateful for the personal strength that she gained from the process.

"I feel like I was reborn, almost," Sydney said. "Mentally and physically."

**Story by Millie Rice  
Designer Clara Barresi, Lily Higgins, and Millie Rice**

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