

My story begins in high school. High school can be an awkward time for a teenage girl; you want to fit in, be liked, be beautiful, and have boys like you. Many people still haven't quite got the confidence or self-esteem they get in later years during this time. I wanted to be beautiful. I grew up as a tomboy and never paid much attention to boys or my looks until I hit high school. I began seeing magazine and television ads with beautiful, tan models and after looking at myself, I felt that I didn't measure up. I tanned very easily and decided that's how I wanted to look. I began working at Celsius Tannery when I was 17 years old.

When I started working there, you pretty much had to be tan to sell the products and make commission. Soon, I was tanning 5 days a week. I felt good. My face was blemish-free, clear, and perfect, my teeth white, I looked great in clothes, and I liked the confidence that tanning gave to me. My parents repeatedly asked me to stop tanning, but being a know-it-all, independent teenager, I ignored their advice. When I went off to college at Mizzou, I transferred to another tanning salon that was owned by Celsius Tannery. I worked there for 4 years of college as well and kept the same tanning habits. I never needed money or a job, but the fact that I didn't have to pay for tanning sessions was an extra incentive that I felt I couldn't pass up. I would watch girls drop anywhere from \$50 to \$300 a month just to tan, and I thought, "How silly. I'm getting this for free."

Reality soon started creeping in when my boyfriend at the time mentioned that a mole on my calf looked really dark and raised. He suggested I go to a dermatologist and have it looked at, but I brushed it off. I was in my early twenties, a time when you still think you're invincible. I finally went to see a dermatologist a few years later after my primary care physician became concerned. The mole on my calf was biopsied, but there was a mole on my right thigh that was a concern, along with 4 others. I had to be photographed almost completely naked while pictures were taken of my entire body. Biopsies were taken on all 6 moles that day and I was told I would receive a phone call in two weeks about the results, earlier if it was bad news. Three days later, I was sitting on my deck reading a book when the phone rang. I looked at the phone while it rang and silent tears started to stream down my cheeks. I knew something was wrong. I couldn't bring myself to call the office back; I knew what kind of news I would be receiving. When I calmed myself and spoke with the doctor, it was confirmed. I had melanoma. And here I was, 25 years old and full of life, suddenly feeling numb and wondering if I was going to die.

This surgery would be the first of many. What were dime-sized scars from biopsies would turn into three 4-inch scars, an 8 inch scar, and two 3 inch scars over the course of 5 years from melanoma. I've had so many minor surgeries as well, that I have completely lost count. Scars now covered my body. For several years, I had to see my dermatologist every 3 months. I now go every 6 months and will be going to these bi-yearly appointments for the rest of my life.

Unfortunately, many people get cancer through genetics or an unfortunate roll of the dice. I got cancer by participating in an activity that was completely avoidable. In my quest for beauty, I in return had permanently disfigured myself.

The fashion and advertisement industry have made beauty standards unrealistic, destructive, and inhuman. We see beauty in a very superficial way. We see it in hair color, makeup, skin color, numbers on a scale. We see it through Photoshop and the digital altering of selfies. Women that use these digital enhancing techniques are usually often looking for confirmation from others about their beauty. They want others to view them as perfect, flawless. I believe this marks the beginning of body image distortion and the impossible quest for perfection.

I now see beauty in the unconventional. I see it in a crooked tooth, a lopsided smile, my pale skin, and jagged scars. Scars make you different. Scars aren't included in the conventional notion of beauty and I think that makes it hard to accept them.

I used to be ashamed and embarrassed of my scars. Some are in very visible places and I used to tell people who asked about them that I was in a shark attack when I was in Australia, just to avoid the subject of cancer. I realized that I was letting the cancer rule my life and quickly changed my attitude. I will not allow the cancer to win and I most certainly will not go down without a fight. I still feel scared that it will keep coming back, but it has not kept me from living and traveling.

As I write this on the day of another surgery, I want to share with everyone my story and the importance of not using tanning beds and using sunscreen every day. Melanoma kills one person every hour. Using a tanning bed increases your risk of melanoma by 75 percent. Be smart, use sunscreen, don't use tanning beds, and avoid being a statistic for melanoma.

My family and I are participating in the Miles Against Melanoma annual 5K run on May 30<sup>th</sup> at 8 a.m. at Lake Remembrance in Blue Springs. I would love for anyone that could participate to do so. Your entry fee will go towards funding education and research for skin cancer.