

Her Life Changed in an Instant

But Rachael Magner uses her experience to help others

Rachael Magner was a typical college sophomore in 2005. Studying psychology, anthropology and sociology, the young woman from Connecticut planned to counsel adolescents when she graduated from Lafayette College. She played rugby and managed the school softball team, and was enjoying college life.

Then one fateful Friday night, she stopped in the kitchen of a friend's apartment to say goodbye. She leaned on a cart, not realizing it was on wheels. The next thing she knew, she was being drenched with sizzling oil from a deep fryer.

Magner suffered severe burns on her back, arm, chest and legs. She spent several weeks in the burn unit at Lehigh Valley Hospital, then many more months recovering while back at school. She has had three surgeries, with more possibly to come. Coping with the physical and emotional scars left by the experience has been a struggle.

"Your world turns upside down in seconds," Magner says. "I had never been through anything like that, even with family or friends, so I wasn't prepared for how hard it hit me.

"People don't know how to react to you," she says. "I felt like I was so different, especially on a college campus. I needed a lot of help, but I pushed my friends away because I didn't want to be a burden. I lost interest in college activities and stopped going out. The more I pulled back, the more I felt like an outsider."

While she found it hard to stay focused on schoolwork with a full schedule of doctor visits and physical therapy, Magner managed to finish the semester. Two days later, she left for a class in London for the summer. It wasn't until she started the fall semester that she felt the full impact of all that had happened.



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“I realized I had to address the issues and not hide from the world anymore,” she says. “It’s easy to become isolated when you feel like you don’t fit in anymore, but you need to deal with it head on. The harder you stuff it, the more it will come back to haunt you.”

Magner has found tremendous support from the burn unit staff, and from other burn victims. “You feel like no one understands you, but then you realize they’ve experienced the same issues and been on the same emotional roller coaster that you have. They know what helps—everything from making scars more comfortable to handling stares from other people. You realize you’re not really alone after all.”

Magner is so grateful for this support that she’s now helping other burn victims. She volunteered at a summer burn camp for children, and plans to get her master’s degree in social work after she graduates this spring so she can counsel burn and trauma victims. She has started working as a mental health technician in the Behavioral Health Center at Lehigh Valley Hospital-Muhlenberg.

Magner has also found physical comfort and healing from the hospital burn specialists. Her scarred skin is very itchy and tight, and in some areas has no feeling. She has to avoid the sun because this skin sunburns easily, and she’s also had to adapt her exercise routine. When she attended a program at Lehigh Valley Hospital called Beyond the Burn, she was able to try different kinds of therapies, like scar massage and microdermabrasion. She also learned about camouflage techniques such as permanent makeup and discovered ways to handle questions from others. When the program is offered this October, she will be assisting.

“It’s important to make connections with others who can help you, either online or through programs like this one,” she says. “You discover new ways to feel better, and it’s great to be part of an environment where you’re unconditionally accepted.”



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