

Pelle Wall

When I first began shadowing at the Bateman Horne Center as a premedical student the summer before my senior year of college, I had never heard of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, and the term fibromyalgia sounded only vaguely familiar. Nevertheless, I quickly developed an understanding of the devastation these related diseases wreak and the unique challenges those afflicted face. Deeply moved by what I saw observing patient consultations and curious to learn more, I joined the Bateman Horne Center as a research and clinical volunteer intern. In addition to continuing to shadow, I took part in a research project investigating ME/CFS and FM diagnostic criteria, and later on personally carried out intake meetings with patients new to the clinic and compiled their medical history for the physician.

The research in which I was involved entailed my reviewing nearly 100 patient charts, reading through medical and personal histories that often stretched back to individuals' earliest childhood. I read intimate narratives detailing patients' struggles with the disease, including those life circumstances that potentially set the stage for its onset. What I read and heard affected me deeply. Even on days I wasn't volunteering, fragments of people's stories came back to me and I felt the pain and helplessness, exasperation and loss of those desperately fighting to grasp some semblance of a normal life.

I was not, however, completely overwhelmed by the tragedies of the illness, as I also observed the tremendous amount of healing that thoughtful medical attention had provided. In hearing directly from grateful patients, as well as noticing the progress so many charts indicated, I witnessed how Dr. Bateman and her team had lifted individuals up from the darkness of near total disability, breathing into them new life.

Besides acquiring valuable clinical skills such as eliciting past and present medical histories, my time with the Bateman Horne Center has fundamentally humanized the way in which I view those afflicted by illness, ME/CFS and FM in particular. I have begun to understand just how far the ugly consequences of illness can reach, and the fundamental role of health in all that we do. I feel that the intimate experiences I shared with patients have instilled in me a much deeper respect and compassion for those suffering sickness. These experiences have also given me an ability to see each patient as more than their illness, and rather as a unique individual with a rich story of their own.

Although patients rarely, if ever, recovered completely, I came to recognize that medical care didn't necessarily need to find a cure to have a profound impact. I routinely saw how with the diligence, patience, and expertise of Dr. Bateman and her staff, a mom would slowly increase her hours of upright activity from 2 hours to 9 or 10 a day, or a college student became just well enough to re-enroll and finish her degree. These hard-won improvements in the lives of patients may not have alleviated all symptoms, but they made all the difference in the world.

I remain humbled and truly inspired by the extraordinary bravery and steadfast resolve to keep moving forward exhibited by so many patients struggling with ME/CFS and FM, as well as by those providing them medical care with uncommon devotion and attention to the individual. Who can say for sure whether my career will find its way permanently to the field, but one thing is certain: the stories and experiences of those surviving and working to solve these illnesses will stay with me forever.