

# DIPLOMA OF LIFE

**The Kelly Spiva Story**

by

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*(as featured in TEEN Magazine )*

It was the one night we all looked to as the most important night of our young lives. My classmates and I were decked out in our caps and gowns with wide eyes and broad smiles. We were graduating seniors.

As I waited for my name to be called out, I realized that the past seven weeks had turned this night of night into something much different for me.

It was a beautiful spring night, on that fateful March 28th. I was with my boyfriend, Kevin, and two other boys, Raymond and John, for another Friday night of cruising around town in Kevin's hot new car.

We were a few miles out of town, on one of those lazy, inviting country roads that almost begs even the safest of drivers to get a little more heavy on the accelerator than usual. With the spirit of immortal youth, we certainly didn't need any temptation to test the metal of Kevin's new car. As we raced down the casually sloping hillside, the warm spring night scattered our screams far behind us. Without any warning, our world of laughter suddenly began spinning out of control. Just as quickly, my world went blank.

When I opened my eyes, I knew that something awful had happened. The hatchback of the car was crowding me as I lay on the ground. There was an eerie silence as I cried out for help.

Raymond crawled over to me, his eyes reflecting the terror of an innocent night of fun turned into a nightmare. I asked him to remove whatever was holding my legs so that I could get up.

"There's nothing on your legs!" he told me in a confused state of panic.

I reached around and felt a large lump on my lower back. I knew then that my back was broken. I remember thinking how strange it was to be lying there with a broken body, yet I felt no pain at all.

For the next few days, my life faded in and out of reality. I do remember at one point, someone telling me that John had died in the accident. Kevin and Ray would be okay. What a tragic ending to a night of uneventful play in a teenager's life.

In another moment of reality, I remember a doctor trying to tell me the extent of my injuries. He seemed very uncomfortable, until I broke the ice for him.

"My back is broken and I will never walk again." I said with little emotion. I didn't need a doctor to tell me that.

The doctor tried to comfort me and was very careful in finding just the right words of hope for my future. I really don't remember anything he said. I just remember that his awkward speech was not necessary. I had already resolved myself to a future of being challenged from a wheelchair.

It's funny how something like this can turn your negative qualities into your greatest allies.

Before the accident, I was a bull-headed, competitive kid who only cared about playing on my school's softball team and having fun. Schoolwork wasn't important to me, and I'm honest enough to admit that there was some question as to whether I would be able to graduate with my class in the spring. But I was having too much fun to worry about something as trivial as graduation.

After the accident, however, I found that bull-headed determination being channeled in a whole new direction. Suddenly, it became important to me that I graduate with my class. My competitive spirit refused to let me feel sorry for myself. I was motivated and anxious to get started on the new challenges that awaited my new life in a wheelchair. I became focused on doing whatever it would take to roll down the aisle with my classmates and receive my high school diploma.

My mother got me into Shepard Spinal Center, in Atlanta, Georgia. It was a highly recommended rehab center that specializes in helping patients like myself adjust to life in a wheelchair.

When I first got there, I quickly became aware of two things that really made an impression on me.

First, I could see many other people in wheelchairs with injuries that were clearly worse than mine. I felt really humbled. Sure, I had two legs that would never walk again, but I could see that I was one of the lucky ones. Any self-pity that may have been lingering deep inside was quickly cast aside.

Next, I was immediately struck by the atmosphere. I expected a very serious, almost somber environment when I arrived, but I found the atmosphere to be very comfortable and light-hearted. There was a real positive feeling in the air, with laughter generously sprinkled about. I could see the confidence in the other patient's eyes as they greeted me. I knew that I was going to be okay. I knew that I was going to get well.

The doctors told me to expect to be there from two to three months, but six weeks sounded much better to me. After all, I had a date with my senior class. I was not going to miss my graduation.

They told me it was important for me to set goals, but I only had one.

"I'm going to graduate with my senior class." I told them with a bull-headed determination consistent with my personality.

From that point on, the staff focused their efforts on helping me achieve my goal. Whatever it takes, Kelly Spiva is going to graduate with her senior class on June 9th, 1992.

For the next seven weeks, my life was transformed with each new adventure. So many of life's routines become a frustrating challenge when you're confined to a wheelchair. But the staff kept encouraging me to push forward and keep trying. All the

hard work, sweat and tears were overshadowed by my absolute determination not to let a wheelchair limit my life.

My days consisted of school,(remember, at the time of the accident, my graduating was not a sure thing. In many ways, those two hours of school work in the mornings were the most difficult time of my day), counseling, physical therapy, recreational therapy, and my favorite time, community outings.

Every patient had to participate on a set number of community outings so that they could apply what they were learning in the general public. After the first couple of outings, I was quick to sign up for every one of them.

The world is so different from the eyes of a wheelchair, but I've always believed that no matter what your situation, it's up to you to make it a positive or negative experience. Being young and full of life, I have always approached life's adventures with a spirit of having fun. Though there are many obstacles out in the real world for a person confined to a wheelchair, I was determined not to let it discourage me. I always tried to keep a positive attitude and take advantage of every situation that I encountered.

In seven weeks, I had learned a lot more than just getting around in a wheelchair. I was a carefree teenager who had to grow up a lot faster than I had ever planned to. But, for the first time in my life, I truly believed in myself. I knew that with self-confidence, self-discipline and a positive attitude, there were no limitations to what I could achieve in my future.

I also learned that part of growing up means opening yourself up to other people and letting them become a part of your life. This isn't an easy lesson for a teenager to learn. So much of being a teenager is that struggle for independence... that push to become your own boss... to be in control of your life. But I had learned that by opening up to others, I gained more control and independence in my own life.

As I waited off stage for my name to be called on that special graduation night, I looked out at my classmates and their families and realized that I was not the only victim

in the accident. Your senior year in high school is not supposed to include a course in dealing with the death of a close friend. I had spent the last seven weeks so wrapped up in my own rehabilitation, I hadn't taken the time to really appreciate how much the accident had affected my class. The moment of silence they set aside for John brought a tearful and somber feeling to what should have been a festive time of celebration.

I wanted so badly to tell them that everything would be okay. I wanted to tell them to be strong and have faith. I wanted to share with them all the lessons I had learned over the past seven weeks. With self-confidence, self-discipline and a positive attitude, they, too, would find a future full of limitless opportunities.

When they called my name out, I made my way onto the stage. The emotionally charged standing ovation was a bit overwhelming and made me feel a bit awkward. I felt lucky to be able to receive my diploma and was excited about moving on to my new world of adventure that awaits me in college.

But I also realized that I was a symbol of the healing process that my fellow students and parents needed so badly. Since the accident, they had been dealing with so much pain over John's death. My presence on that stage represented the survival from that terrible tragedy. I hoped that they, too, would be able to rehabilitate their broken lives and move forward towards a brighter tomorrow.

That night we received diplomas proclaiming us to be high school graduates. But in many ways, we realized that we had truly become graduates of life.