

## **Saskia Cousins-Joyce, TTS34**

*I was 13 years old when I was diagnosed with type one diabetes. My pancreas betrayed me and I became captive to my dying body. Learning of my reduced life expectancy shattered my juvenile sense of invulnerability. My world of possibilities contracted around me with every hospital visit and shot. It scared me that I would never be independent from my disease and the people who would try and manage it for me. I had to learn to take care of myself.*

*The first week I recall staring at my leg with the primed needle for 30 minutes before getting the courage to pierce my skin. When I was a sophomore in high school, I found myself craving something more than my small Vermont high school could offer. I wanted to feel the thrill that comes when you're pushed to expand and grow, something more than the homogeneous opinions and lifestyles represented around me. I researched and finally applied to a competitive, all-girls program that took 12 students for a semester in Southern Africa.*

*As the first and only student with diabetes to apply for the program, I had to convince them I could handle the complex logistics involved in caring for myself as we crossed deserts and slept on the banks of the Zambezi River. My doctors were against the idea and I struggled to convince my family, as well as myself, that I could do it. The gravity of fulfilling my dream was daunting but I carefully developed a plan with which I was willing to trust my life. In August of 2019, with a duffel bag of medical supplies, I departed for Zambia.*

*Adjusting to life on the move was difficult, but I learned to make arrangements with the hostels and families I stayed with to accommodate my needs including refrigerating my insulin between 36 and 46 degrees Fahrenheit. The classes were intense and experientially meaningful; I fell in love with learning again and my mind and soul felt alive.*

*I was 3 months in, staying at an Indigenous village in the Kalahari desert, when my insulin froze. I suddenly found myself in life threatening danger. I felt like a failure and a fraud letting this happen. I had talked myself up and worked so hard to be on this program, promising everyone I was capable, and for the first time I completely doubted my ability to push the boundary. I wanted to prove it was possible for diabetics to live this kind of life, my kind of life, and now I was unsure.*

*I was desperate to continue my education and find a solution. For two days we communicated urgently across continents with doctors, my family, and my team of*

*teachers. We located a pharmacy across the border in Namibia that would fill a prescription for my insulin. We drove eight hours to the capital, Windhoek, the very next day.*

*After days of uncertainty, I finally secured my insulin. I struggled to get myself to Southern Africa and worked even harder to remain there in spite of these challenges. There were some moments I wanted to go home and take it all back. However those moments seem insignificant now as I look back at the incredible experience and realize how much it changed me for the better. At 16, I knew that if I was committed to living my dreams, nothing was going to stop me. I don't want my life to be defined by my struggles or shortfalls. I hope I always push myself to experience failure and adversity and still learn to love the journey.*