

My Year in Braces
by
Vicki

I had just turned sixteen when it all began. I got this pain in my left knee. It wasn't bad at first but then it got worse. I started to limp a little and my mom insisted that I see the family doctor. He wasn't sure what the problem was but said that it would probably go away in a week or two. It didn't. It got steadily worse and I was really having trouble walking. This time my mom insisted that I see a specialist.

"Well Mrs. Williams, I am quite sure I know what Karen's problem is," Dr. Woods said after I had undergone x-rays and an MRI. He continued to explain that I had some sort of rare inflammatory condition. I really wasn't interested in the medical mumbo jumbo, I just wanted to get it fixed.

"There is no simple cure for this problem. It just takes time and it is essential that no stress be placed on the knee when it is bent. I am going to recommend that Karen be fitted with a suitable brace that she will need to wear at all times except when sleeping. Placing any stress on the knee will negate any healing progress," Dr. Woods explained. "I will call our orthotist with the prescription. You should make an appointment with him as soon as possible. I want to see Karen in a month. Let me know if you have any questions," Dr. Woods continued.

This wasn't bad. I was afraid I might need some sort of operation. A knee brace might even be kind of cool. Even though I wasn't really athletic everyone would probably assume I hurt myself in sports. I couldn't have been more off base.

We went to see the orthotist the next day. I didn't know what an orthotist was at first and then I learned that they are people who make braces. The place was really creepy. There were people there who were missing limbs and waiting to get artificial legs or those hook things if they didn't have an arm. I couldn't believe it when I saw a girl around my age with two of those hooks. It looked like she was there for some sort of adjustments. She didn't seem the least bit upset and acted like she had had the hooks all her life.

"How long has she had those hooks," I asked the receptionist discretely.

"Ellen? She was born without arms. She only has stumps a few inches below her shoulders. She has used hooks all her life," she replied. "Ellen is positively amazing. She acts so natural when she uses them you almost forget she is really missing both her arms." I was so happy I had a minor problem. Just the thought of having to use metal hooks instead of hands was scary.

A few minutes later we got to see the orthotist. He was a really nice guy named Will.

“Karen, I need you to remove your jeans so I can measure you for your braces,” Will said. “Don’t be embarrassed, just think of me as you do your doctor.”

He said braces, didn’t he? I was only getting one for my left knee. I did as he said and then he had me sit on an examining table with my bare legs out in front of me. He then made all sorts of measurements. I had no idea why but he measured around my legs with a tape measure at various points from my ankles to crotch. He even made a tracing of my entire leg from my foot to my crotch. He then surprised me by doing the same thing to my right leg.

“But that knee’s fine,” I said.

“Well Karen, after you left, Dr. Woods took a closer look at your MRI and he feels your right knee is showing some signs of inflammation. He has recommended that you wear a brace on that leg as well,” he explained.

“Two braces? Oh God that’s not cool at all,” I exclaimed now feeling really upset. I still wondered why he made all those measurements just for my knee. He even asked my shoe size. What on earth for? I wore a size six.

After I put my pants on we were told that my braces would be ready in a week. On the way out my mother made an appointment for the fitting as he called it. Why did I need a fitting for a couple of crummy knee braces? What was so special it took a week? Didn’t they have them in stock? The girl with the two hooks was speaking to a nurse and they were laughing. She was gesturing with her hooks like everyone with arms does. I still couldn’t imagine what it would be like having to use hooks instead of hands.

The week went by slowly and I stayed off my feet for the most part. It was kind of depressing since it was the end of the summer and school was just a couple of weeks away. I wasn’t excited about having to wear knee braces to school. Finally it was time to get my braces and we headed out to the orthotist. I was really happy in a way since I was limping really badly and I was starting to get afraid I wouldn’t be able to walk in a few days. I hoped the braces made it easier to walk.

For some reason I was told to wear a skirt instead of jeans. I figured it might be because the jeans might be too tight around the brace. I did like tight jeans and I noticed that Will took that in along with my ample breasts showing under my tank top during my first visit.

After I took my skirt off I was helped onto the examining table once again. I had worn one of my usual mid thigh skirts that were the rage with my age group. That’s pretty much the only length for skirts in the junior department. It

was then that Will brought over my new braces. I got the shock of my life. These weren't just knee braces, they were great big long and heavy braces with shoes attached. God the shoes, they were a heavy orthopedic style. I remember seeing pictures of children with Polio wearing braces that looked just like these. Pictures of little girls in short little fluffy dresses balancing on their crutches with two heavy braces on their legs were used for posters to raise money. I didn't have Polio, why was I going to have to wear Polio braces? I didn't want to look like a poster girl.

"Those can't be for me. Their not knee braces," I protested.

"Actually Karen they are what are known as KAFOs. That stands for knee, ankle, and foot orthosis. In order to adequately brace your knees the braces need to extend upward to your crotch and down to your ankle. It is pretty much impossible to make a brace that ends just above your ankle and so we use a free motion ankle joint and attach the brace to a suitable sturdy shoe. Of course the knee joints are not free motion. They lock in place when you stand so your knees won't bend at all."

"How can I walk?" I asked in a panic.

"Well you will want to use a pair of forearm crutches. Not being paralyzed you could probably walk without crutches, but you will really want them for support and balance. You'll find out in a few minutes," Will explained as I was now totally grossed out by the looks of the horrible braces. Not just one, but two.

The first step was to place my left leg inside the brace just above the shoe. Will then helped me slip my foot into the shoe. I was so happy I wore socks. He then tied the laces. The shoe wasn't real feminine, but not as bad looking as I first thought.

"We can have stirrups mounted on some of your more sturdy shoes if you want Karen. I can show you how to remove the screws at the ankles and change the shoes. The stirrup is the U shaped metal part that goes under the heel. It's sort of like the stirrups on saddles." This was for real. I was going to have to wear these horrible braces.

Next Will fastened the strap on the band that went around my calf. The next band was wider and fit just above my knee. The final cuff was very wide and surrounded my leg at crotch level. Two heavy metal bars went from my crotch level to my ankle joints and then the stirrup went around my shoe. After buckling the straps Will then buckled a special knee pad that covered my knee and had four straps.

"Now Karen, see these little metal boxlike things on each side of your knee? Those are the drop locks. If you raise them up then your knee joint can bend. When you stand, the drop locks slip down over the knee joint and lock it. It is very simple and yet effective. When you are standing there will be no

possibility of bending your knees unless you hold the drop locks up. When you sit down you will need to raise the locks so your legs will bend into the sitting position.”

After the left brace was on the steps were repeated for my right brace. I now had two long leg braces on. Two KAFOs as I now knew they were called. I dreaded what was coming next. I was instructed to push myself forward so my legs were over the end of the table. Will supported me while I stood up. I heard the four drop locks slip down in place. I was now standing in my braces and fully locked. Will brought over two forearm crutches. I slipped my hands through the cuffs and grabbed the handles. Will made a minor adjustment to the crutch height.

“Okay Karen, see if you can walk. It won’t be hard, It is very hard for anyone paralyzed. They usually have to swing their legs forward. You can use your hip joints to move your legs. Just do it anyway you want and use your crutches for support. You will develop your own technique and you will find you can walk pretty fast with a little practice.”

I took a couple of steps forward. I just couldn’t believe the feeling of my legs being rigidly locked into a straight position and without any ability to bend my knees. This was really the pits. I dreaded thinking that I would have to walk this way until I got better.

“Can I put my skirt on?” I asked. I was feeling a little naked in just my panties.

“Of course,” Will said as he let me step through the skirt. That was a little tricky but then I got my skirt up. I knew it was covering only the upper thigh cuff. Some of the lower thigh cuff and everything else was displayed for all the world to see.

I spent the next hour practicing walking around in my new braces. There were several full length mirrors on the wall and I just about fainted when I saw what I looked like in the braces and using the crutches. Will had explained that I would want to practice getting up curbs and small obstacles. He cautioned me about not trying stairs without someone right there to support me. It was too dangerous. “Use elevators when you can,” he said. The last thing I did was practice sitting down and standing up. That was really hard. I had to use my arms to kind of fall into the chair. I could then unlock my knee joints and let my legs drop down. I knew I would look so clumsy doing this.

“Whatever you do Karen, do not unlock your knees until you are sitting. If you do unlock it will be reflex to put weight on your unlocked knees and that will be very bad for your condition,” the orthotist told me. I had to repeat the procedure to stand up. First I extended my legs and then locked my knees. I then used my arms and crutches to stand up. I knew I needed practice,

I felt so awful when we left as I crutched my way to the car. Getting in the car was another story. My life in braces was not going to be easy. I wasn't looking forward to wearing the damn things from the time I got up until I went to bed. I knew just how bad it was when the first thing I had to do the next day was get into the braces before I even got out of bed. This was a real pain. It took me a while to fasten all the straps and get my knee pads in place. I then slid over to the edge of the bed and let my legs hang over. I pushed my braced legs out and locked the knee locks. I then used my crutches to stand up. I hated the braces so much. Walking was now really slow, but at least my knee didn't bother me.

The first day of wearing my braces full time was really difficult. I wanted to take them off so badly. To make matters worse a couple of my friends came over.

"Oh God Karen, those look so horrible," Lynn said to me. "You mean you need to wear them all the time?"

"Yeah, I can't ever put weight on my legs unless my braces are locked," I explained. "I walk real slow, but I can get around okay."

The next day my mom drove me and my two girlfriends to the mall. It was hot out and I wore shorts and a tank top. I was really self conscious as I crutched my way into the mall. I just knew that everyone was looking at me and could see almost all of my braces except the top thigh bands. The three of us spent a couple of hours looking at clothes and other girl stuff. My mother went off to do her own shopping. I heard a few comments about how tough it must be to be so young and crippled. I knew people assumed that I would be like this permanently. After a while I started to get a little used to the braces and was getting around pretty well with my crutches. I stopped thinking about the stares I was getting. After all, I would be this way for at least several months according to my doctor. I just couldn't wait until I wouldn't need the braces. The worst part of our outing was trying to sit down in the food court. I felt like every eye in the place was on me. Finally I got seated and unlocked my braces and my legs fell down. One of my friends helped push the chair in closer to the table.

After about a week I got really tired of getting in and out of my braces in the morning to bath and then get back into them to get dressed. I did find that wearing pantyhose helped prevent the chaffing I was told to expect. It was kind of crazy to wear pantyhose. I hardly ever wore them except for special occasions and now I was wearing them every day. I even wore support hose as they were heavier and less likely to run under the braces. They did feel good on my legs as they made me feel the braces a little less. One of the worst things was going to the ladies room. Getting on and off the toilet was a pain. Besides, I couldn't even get my panties and pantyhose down very far because the pantyhose were under my braces. I needed some way to get around without the damn braces. And clothing, that was another story. I was stuck wearing skirts or shorts. I couldn't get my foot through any of my jeans because of the shoe. I did figure a way to

unscrew the stirrups and remove the shoes, get into my jeans and then reattach the stirrups after slipping on the shoes. That was a real pain. I liked to cover up the braces but skirts were just so much easier that I said the hell with it and stopped worrying about people seeing the braces. I did buy a few longer skirts but I refused anything that was below the knee, braces be damned.

It was then that I thought of a solution to the need to get in and out of my braces so often to just get around. I never thought I would actually want a wheelchair but I did now. I discussed it with my mom. She called the doctor and he said it was a good idea as long as I never stood up to get in and out of the chair. The next day we went to a local medical supply company. The salesman was very accommodating.

“This model is very popular with our teens. Most of them don’t use braces and since they spend all their time in their chairs they like them to look a little sexy,” he said. “This model is kind of expensive but is really first rate.”

I actually found myself understanding what he meant by sexy. Unlike the industrial hospital wheelchairs this model was sleek. I liked it. I convinced my mother that it was the right one.

“Your daughter does very well using her braces,” the salesman said. “I hope she doesn’t like this chair so much that she stops walking,” he said after I crutched my way to the car and the salesman loaded my new wheelchair into the car. I was really anxious to get home and out of my braces so I could play around with my new chair. The first thing I did was sit on the bed and take off my braces. I then slid into the wheelchair. It was great. I could even cross my legs. I couldn’t do that with my braces on. I could even go without the pantyhose now.

I really liked the chair. I had a very thick seat cushion that was very comfortable. The chair rolled so effortlessly on very good bearings. I quickly learned to maneuver it all over the house. It felt so good to get around without needing the braces. I could now just slip into and out of my wheelchair and onto the bed or couch. I even thought I might want to use it out in public instead of my braces. What was happening to me?

I did just that the next time I went out with my friends. They wanted to push me but I insisted that I wasn’t handicapped and I could push myself. Of course I really was handicapped now. I had yet to actually realize that. I liked the comfort of the chair. I didn’t get tired like I did walking in the braces which was fairly hard work. What I found was a good compromise was to go out wearing my braces but using my wheelchair. That way I could get up and walk if I wanted to. I could bring my crutches since the chair had a special holder mounted on the back that would hold them.

My first day back at school was a little traumatic. Only a few of my friends had seen me in braces and now everyone did. The teachers were very nice and

helped me if I needed it. Of course I carried things in a backpack since I needed my hands free to use my crutches. Soon I got into the swing of things at school and my braces were accepted by my friends. Of course some kids didn't know me and I assumed they thought I would be like this for the rest of my life.

I saw my doctor after three months in braces. The MRI showed only a slight improvement. I was hoping that he would say I didn't need the braces any more.

"Karen should continue wearing her braces for another six months and then we will see if there is enough progress so that she might not need them full time," he said.

I was devastated. Another six months in the damn things. Well the months rolled on and I was then quite used to being braced or using my wheelchair. I did pretty much everything I used to do with my friends except anything physical. I no longer gave any thought to the way I looked in public. I got so used to my braced legs that at times I almost forgot I was handicapped.

The six months rolled around and I got more bad news. I was still not well enough to get out of the braces. It would be another three months. I had pretty much accepted that I would be braced even longer as my luck had it. My braces and wheelchair were part of me now. I even had the luck to be asked out on dates. Since I was very attractive and the guys knew I would be rid of the braces in a few months they didn't mind being with me. I think they even liked the idea that I was disabled and that they would need to help me once in a while. If a curb was very high I sometimes had a problem getting my braced leg up on top to then push my other leg up and over with my crutches. Guys seemed to like to grab me under the arms and help my up.

On my next visit to the doctor I got some good news. I could go for an hour a day without braces if I didn't do a lot of walking and I didn't climb stairs. At first it was actually hard to walk without my braces. I had to use my crutches. The time each day was increased and eventually I didn't need the braces at all. However, I was instructed that I should use my crutches at all times to reduce the weight on my knees as I walked. I did that for the next two months. It was nice to be able to walk without braces, but I didn't like needing my crutches. I still liked to use my wheelchair at home. For some reason I was comfortable in my chair.

Finally I was told that I didn't need to use my crutches and that I could resume my normal life except that I needed to avoid climbing stairs and doing any strenuous activities like running. I had been in braces for a little over a year and I hoped I would never need them again. However, my doctor advised me to keep my braces and crutches since there was the possibility that my condition would return. They are in the closet along with my wheelchair. I didn't want to give it up. There was something I liked about it. Maybe it was sexy.

Deep down inside I keep getting this feeling that it wouldn't be long until I was back in my braces. Looking back on my year in braces I realized that I was special that year. I had a kind of advantage in being handicapped. Now I was just another pretty girl. Hmmm.

The End