

Rare Autoimmune Disease Leads Her to Enter Public Health, Speak out on Behalf of Stem Cell Research

THE CROWDED NEWS CONFERENCE at UCLA's new Neuroscience Research Building last August featured comments from many of California's most powerful political figures, united in their opposition to congressional legislation that would place new limits on human embryonic stem cell research. But arguably the most memorable moment came when a 26-year-old UCLA School of Public Health student spoke eloquently about the personal nature of her opposition to the bill.

"I am not a governor or a senator or a famous researcher," said **CANDACE COFFEE**, a second-year M.P.H. student who was diagnosed, at the age of 24, with a rare and potentially fatal autoimmune condition called Devic's disease. "But this legislation is about me. Don't take away my hope."

A former Miss Bakersfield who aspired to a career in the performing arts, Coffee graduated with honors from UC Irvine. After college, she decided to spend time traveling and doing volunteer work in Tibet. While there, she fell ill. Within a week, Coffee was blind in her left eye. After returning to California, she went totally blind for several months and was, for a time, unable to walk without assistance. In April 2003, she was diagnosed with Devic's, which causes the body to attack the myelin sheath covering the central nervous system.

Coffee was treated with steroids and has been in remission for more than two years, but she remains blind in one eye and contends daily with stabbing headaches, nausea and fatigue. Remarkably upbeat, Coffee quips that her doctors call her a "professional patient" – she exercises daily and adheres without fail to the extensive drug regimen she is prescribed. Nonetheless, the chronic nausea and pain occasionally force her to leave the classroom, listening to lectures through the door.

Devic's changed her priorities. "When something like that happens, you come to terms with what really matters," Coffee says. "I realized I had been very self-focused and hadn't been contributing anything to my community." After her diagnosis, she took a position as a health services coordinator with the Muscular Dystrophy Association; that experience helped her decide public health was the field for her.

"This is a school filled with amazing people – passionate, idealistic and dedicated," says Coffee, who has also worked part-time at the Santa Monica-based nonprofit environmental organization Heal the Bay, where one of her tasks has been to teach children about ocean pollution from urban runoff. Her ultimate goal is to open a comprehensive care center for women newly diagnosed with chronic diseases.

Meanwhile, she continues to be a prominent spokesperson on behalf of stem cell research, a role that originated when Coffee sent unsolicited ideas to the campaign for Proposition 71, the successful 2004 California initiative to provide \$3 billion in bond funding for human embryonic stem cell research in the state.

Coffee acknowledges that not everyone from her conservative hometown agreed with her stand, but she has never regretted expressing her convictions in public. "These are embryos that are already designated for destruction," she says. "It's taking 5- to 8-day-old masses of cells that are going to be discarded and using them for something amazing – to take life that's already in existence and keep it there. Once I learned that, I couldn't understand why everyone wouldn't be on board."

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— Candace Coffee (center)

