

Journeys of Inspiration



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Social Media Sensation

For most of us, just talking about inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) is difficult and sharing the intimate details of our ostomy is nearly impossible. Enter Maggie Tretton (Baldwin), a petite pixie with long brown hair and eyes that sparkle with joy who openly shares her life — her whole life — with her tens of thousands of social media followers. You may know her as “Let’s Talk IBD” and have likely seen some of her YouTube episodes, which are as addicting as a season of *Downton Abbey*. Maggie’s warm, engaging style makes you feel like you are just sitting across the table from her at the 1800’s dairy farm that she and her husband, Zak, have been restoring — complete with a rustic stone barn that they are turning into an unforgettable wedding venue.

Maggie’s symptoms began when she was about eight years old and were the beginning of an endless number of trips to the doctor. She was never given a clear diagnosis and the only treatment that was offered was to “drink more milk.” Maggie dutifully complied but despite her increased milk drinking efforts, she soon fell way behind in the growth charts and was the smallest girl in her class. At that point, her physician suspected an eating disorder, a notion Maggie quickly dispels, “I wanted to gain weight, and I wanted to eat, but I had a hard time because whenever I ate, I felt like I was going to throw up,” she recalls.

Finally Diagnosed

When Maggie was 11, she was finally given the diagnosis of Crohn’s disease. She remembers it as being a very confusing time in her life that included having to start taking all kinds of medications that didn’t seem to really help. To help her gain weight and get proper nourishment, she began using a nasogastric tube that she inserted every night and removed every morning. Unfortunately, Maggie

developed three strictures, one in her colon, one in her terminal ileum and one in her rectum. When she was a freshman in high school, she underwent her first surgery, a resection at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia.

The night before her operation, Maggie was understandably nervous, especially about the possibility she might wake up with an ostomy. To help allay her fears, she turned to her father for reassurance and together they thought back to their recent appointment with the doctor when he confidently said, “There is only a one in a million chance you will come out of this surgery with an ostomy.” While Maggie desperately wanted to believe that, she also knew that it still might happen.

Maggie remembers feeling really good after the surgery. Unfortunately, that feeling was short lived as her vitals soon started signaling that she was in distress. She had an obstruction that was very painful, but worse, led her to become septic. (Having dealt with sepsis during my own illness I know how serious and potentially life-threatening that can be.)

Maggie vividly remembers, “It was a day that I can’t forget, but can barely remember at the same time.” Her surgeon had to operate again and saved her life that night, but when Maggie woke up three days later, her worst fear had come true... she had an ileostomy. Based on the feelings of foreboding from before her surgery, the ostomy was not a complete surprise, but Maggie was still devastated.

She began to tick off all the things in her life that she would not be able to do anymore, like go to school and play soccer. Maggie also recalls a moment where a seed of hope was planted before she left the hospital. As she slipped out of her hospital gown and pulled on the shirt she was wearing when she entered the hospital a month before, she looked in the mirror and thought, “Wait a second, I don’t even see my ostomy bag. Perhaps I will be able to hide it after all.” She decided

to keep that realization to herself, though, so she could convince her dad to buy her a new wardrobe.

Overwhelmed

The first few weeks after her operation, Maggie was overwhelmed with caring for her ostomy and her dad stepped in to take care of changing her bag and nursing her wound for the first six months after surgery. In addition to her dad, there were two people that came alongside Maggie to give her a boost of confidence.

The first was her boyfriend, who also had an ostomy. One day when he was visiting Maggie at her house, her bag started leaking and Maggie panicked because, although her boyfriend was completely independent with his care, she didn't want to admit that she had not ever changed or taken care of her bag without her dad. Maggie said she was so embarrassed she decided it was time for her to grow up and accept her situation and learn to become independent. Her dad never had to change her system again.

The second person was her best friend who cornered her on her first day back at school and said, "Maggie, I've got to see this thing." Maggie replied, "You know it's my intestine sticking out of me and I have a big incision." Her girlfriend was unfazed and countered, "I don't care. I need to see it." After a quick trip to the bathroom, Maggie lifted her shirt and to her delight, her friend smiled and said, "Oh my gosh, we need to name it. Let's call it Leroy." That one act of kindness demonstrated to Maggie that if she could teach others about her ostomy, they might not be afraid of it. It would have a huge impact on Maggie's life.

Soon after surgery, Maggie started sharing her experience on social media – the good, the bad, and the very ugly. Her down-to-earth style and complete honesty and transparency produced a tremendous response that, over the next few years, would lead to her becoming a well-known and respected social media influencer with over 80,000 followers all over the world!! As her audience steadily increased, Maggie decided that it would



be a good idea to get a little "medical background" to ensure she was providing the correct information to the people who were relying on her. After a couple of Crohn's setbacks, she completed the nursing program at Salisbury University. And, ironically, her first nursing job was back at Children's Hospital in Philadelphia... on the GI floor...where she herself had been a patient! When she found herself taking care of patients in the *same room* where she had struggled after her ostomy surgery, she knew her journey was finally complete.

Making Memories

In October of 2020, Maggie married her college sweetheart, Zak, in the first wedding to take place on the beautiful grounds on the new Tretton Farmstead. They danced their first dance to Brad Paisley's "Empty Hardwood Floor" under the towering old wooden beams in the barn they had been restoring for the past four years.

And today, Maggie continues to share her ostomy journey dealing with topics from feeding tubes to fertility. Her authenticity and experience coupled with her compassionate heart brings hope to IBD sufferers around the world. Maggie has created over 500 videos and when asked how long she plans to continue, she responds with a smile. "Sharing my story has allowed me to connect with thousands of people and provide real life information to help make their journey a little better and maybe more importantly, to let them know that they are not alone. I hope I'll be able to continue that until I'm 90!" 🍷