

## Do You Understand Me?

“Nu you unnernan me?” I said with tears in my eyes. Before you get uninterested due to my incoherent typing, let me help you get to know me more. This was half of my existence, incoherence. At the age of three, I was diagnosed with bifid uvula. According to Dr. Guerrero, bifid uvula, a problem that is typically fixed during infancy, is a case where the uvula has a cleft, causing speech, hearing, and, in worst-case scenarios, breathing problems. However, my parents didn’t realize that I had it until I was two years old because the defect, which is usually characterized with a cleft on the lip (called a cleft palate), was underdeveloped in my case. So if you looked at me, you’d probably see a perfectly normal person. A part of me had wished that my defect were fully developed, so that my parents could’ve done something about it sooner, sparing me the pain of having to live my life through it. But as cliché as it sounds, this was the universe’s way of teaching me about life.

The worst of it happened in grade school. I am a girl born with bifid uvula who lives on Saipan, a small island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, where 48,220 people reside. My situation was uncommon on this island and probably elsewhere, considering the fact that only about two percent of the world’s population are diagnosed with bifid uvula, according to Dr. Jennifer Shu. As far as memory goes, it can only take me as far back as third grade. I distinctly remembered how nervous I was on the first day of third grade because I knew that I was going to be judged for the way I spoke. I could barely say my name let alone have a normal conversation. When the student introductions started, it felt like my heart was going to drop onto my intestines; this was the moment my classmates were going to realize that I wasn’t normal. As a human being, of course we have the tendency to conform to the standard understanding that we need to be like everyone else. As I said my name, both my voice and eyes trembled as tears started to form. After saying my name, a curious thing happened: I waited for everyone to start laughing, however, no one did. They all just looked at each other

with confusion and murmured things like “did you understand what she said?” At that moment, I had wished they just laughed at me; it would’ve hurt less. Instead, as I said the next words to my introduction (and everytime I spoke, really), they knew to anticipate what I was going to say, making me feel so inferior and stupid; like a dog trying to communicate what he/she wants but the owner can’t comprehend so they both stand there guessing what the dog needs. It wasn’t just insulting; it was aggravating. But I couldn’t blame them because it’s not their fault that they can’t understand me. At that moment, all I felt were inferiority and helplessness.

Six months later, I had the privilege of having my uvula repaired with a surgery. They closed my uvula, which was the initial cause of my speech inefficiency. But even after the surgery, my brain was already accustomed to speak the way it did so my speech was still incoherent. A year later, my school and doctor decided to collaborate and help me with my speech by switching my physical education session to do speech therapy instead. Day by day, I doubted my therapist because we would do random and unnecessary things like make paper maches and paint pictures. Then I realized that my therapist would talk to me during those activities and that’s when she would discern the sounds I had a hard time with, specifically sounds that start with “S”, “D”, “P” “T” and “K”. After years of perseverance, patience, and insults, I learned how to speak coherently with my repaired uvula. Through therapy, I learned not to withdraw from a challenge until I finished with satisfaction. Every time I had a task that I needed to finish, I’d think back to the time when I was trying so hard to form the sound of letters with my tongue, stuck in a chair for about an hour until I had finally figured out which part of my mouth my tongue needed to touch in order to make the “S” sound. Having this memory as motivation contributed to the development of my work ethic. Now as a college student, I can not leave my seat until I have finished my work with accuracy, all thanks to the speech therapy sessions I experienced. I also gained a new perspective on

people with disabilities. I understand more than ever that the more different you are, the more you discover that unfortunate events will actually lead you to always better yourself thus having more to offer than the average.

I wasn't born ordinary. I started at a disadvantage yet somehow this makes me one of the more fortunate people in the world. I learned that the everyday necessities that we don't usually think about, speaking for instance, shouldn't be taken for granted. I learned to work hard for things in life because not every life necessity will be handed on a silver platter, no matter how important that necessity is for survival and to persevere even when it seems like nothing is progressing or moving. It led me to do something about situations like this. I can genuinely say that I am better each day than I was previous because of this. I now, with a steady voice proudly say, "Do you understand me?"