

Anali

“At just 6 years old, I remember asking my mom, “When will I be able to look ‘normal’ and have a nose like her?” As a little girl, I noticed I looked different from others...”

My name is Anali, and I was born with a cleft lip and cleft palate. While my memories of seeking treatment are a little foggy or second-hand from my mom, I remember what I felt throughout the entire process so clearly.

Cleft lip and palate are openings or splits in the upper lip or roof of the mouth (palate). Though cleft lip can be as mild as a notch on the lip, mine was from my lip to my nose. Surgery is common for treatment and I had my first procedure at just 5 months old and more throughout my childhood – seven total.

I had mixed emotions as I went through treatment – from feeling nervous and scared, to happy and excited. Many times, I would also feel relief because every procedure pushed me that much closer to recovery.

As a child, I didn't quite understand the significance of each appointment or procedure, but I would feel a difference – I began to breathe better, I could eat much easier and I began to notice that my cleft lip and palate was less noticeable.

At 17 years old, I had my last procedure – surgery number seven. I looked forward to it because after years of treatment, it was all coming to an end. But, I was also sad that I would no longer have the consistency of regular appointments or see the doctors who helped and made me feel better along the way. This was all I had known since I was a baby and no one understood the

challenges I had faced as wholly as they did.

Even though there were times in my life when I struggled with having a cleft lip and palate, I am grateful for the inspirational people I met along the way and the perseverance I gained from my condition.

Today, I am 21 years old, a full-time student at Cal State Los Angeles majoring in biology and I work as a medical firefighter. My treatment experience has inspired my goal to go to medical school and become a doctor, not only help others medically, but also by sharing my story. I hope to be one of those doctors who are impossible to forget, just like the ones who have helped me all my life, such as Dr. Witt and Dr. Chao. I will never forget them, as I am thankful for their service and the impact they had on my life.

Not only did my doctors help my medical condition, they shaped the path that gave me the confidence I have today to help others.

July is National Cleft Lip and Craniofacial Awareness Month and I want everyone out there who was born like me, and who feel different because of it, to know: you are not alone. Everything will be okay, even if it takes time. Trust the process and everyone around you.

