

Lee Cohen-Diversity Statement

I have faced many challenges in my life, but none like those I experienced in the year of 2014. One morning during my service with the Israeli Defense Forces, I received a frantic call from my doctor. He informed me that medical tests had revealed a severe case of cholesteatoma that required immediate surgical intervention. I was utterly petrified to be facing open head surgery alone as my family was not allowed to join me at the time of my surgery. Nonetheless, the next morning I checked into the hospital, and they wheeled me into an operating room. After the surgery, which lasted half a day, I stayed at the hospital to begin my recovery process.

The medical officer at my base ordered me to stay at home to recuperate and rest for the next few months. Operation Protective Edge began two weeks after my surgery. Upon discovering tunnels built under Israeli territory, Israel had decided to retaliate with force, and the 2014 Gaza War broke out. We had 40 to 60 seconds to evacuate to the nearest bomb shelter whenever the missile artillery was about to strike. Night and day, whenever the alarm sounded, my family and I ran into our bomb shelter. Every time I thought it was safe, another alarm went off and the cycle repeated. My immense physical pain and exhaustion were compounded by the emotional toll of the innocent lives lost.

Being a sheltered Valley Girl, I was not prepared for the traumatic experiences of the war. These experiences caused me to become a shell of the lively person I once was. What snapped me out of it was my grandfather. No one has ever known me as he did. His battle with ALS left him unable to do little more than speak. During our visit my grandfather became distraught. As I sat next to him and smoothed his hair down, our special gesture, he told me how helpless he felt to have been apart from each other as I had undergone surgery. I had heard the words that were left unspoken, he may have been talking about the surgery but I understood he

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was referring to the grave fact that soon he would not be alive to be there for me at all. I had been absorbed with my own troubles. I could either wallow in my misfortunes or I could stay present and take joy in the remaining time with the person I held most dear. Right before he passed, he told me to look for signs of him. I continue to find signs of him through the perspective that he has gifted me with. The perspective that solidified my desire to be an advocate.