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Special Education Major Overcomes the Odds

Winthrop University

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Special Education Major Overcomes the Odds

Quick Facts

- Grace Pannell is now a senior studying special education at Winthrop.
- Multiple falls during a basketball game caused her to suffer a traumatic brain injury (TBI). Doctors said she would never live a normal life.



Photo courtesy of Blonde Moments Photography

ROCK HILL, SOUTH CAROLINA — **Grace Pannell** remembers the day the doctors said she would never hold a job or attend college, how they told her parents to make arrangements for her to live at home for the rest of her life.

But Pannell, now a senior special education major at Winthrop University, never lost her faith.

“The doctors said that the brain was not healing, and at this point, the greatest amounts of healing should have already happened,” she recalled.

A year earlier, Pannell jumped for a rebound while playing basketball. Her feet were swept from under her, and the back of her head hit the floor, not once, but twice. Through intense pain, Pannell got to her feet, but the world appeared blurry and uneven, and she fell several more times. Unbeknownst to her, she had already entered the game with a concussion. The damage was done.

The rest of the year was a blur of CT scans, doctors’ visits, MRIs/MRAs, and monitoring. She slept on a mattress on the living room floor, always watched by a parent or her little sister. She had forgotten how to read, could barely communicate, and suffered a constant searing headache. Her parents converted

the basement into an apartment for her, thinking she would live with them permanently. Then, doctors found the true cause of her pain: a misdiagnosed brain bleed, **resulting in a traumatic brain injury (TBI)**.

“I remember hearing this and considering what it meant for my life,” she said. “I remember thinking that if this is what God had for me, then I would be content. But if in any way at all He had another plan, I was trusting He would make His plan happen for my life. I found peace, hope and comfort in knowing that He was able to do anything He desired and that He had not and would not ever lose control.”

Through the long road to recovery, Pannell always turned to her faith and found comfort in thinking about God’s plan for her life.

Eighteen months after her injury, she woke up and just felt “different.”

“My head hurt, but it was not the constant pain that I had before,” she said. “I felt like I had slept that night, which for the last year and a half I had slept nearly all day and all night each day and night but always felt like I had stayed up all night. That day was the start to coming back to ‘regular life.’”

Exactly 35 months after the original injury, she enrolled at York Technical College for one semester before transferring to Winthrop. She joined **Cross Impact** and the **Baptist Collegiate Ministry (BCM)**, worked as a peer mentor, and **volunteers with Harvest Baptist of Rock Hill**. During the week, she also **volunteers at a psychiatric treatment center, where she works with young girls and provides religious counseling**. During the summers, she works as a camp counselor.

Pannell believes going through her TBI experience, one which she still endures every day, will make her a better and more understanding teacher in the classroom, particularly with those with special needs. She calls her TBI one of “the greatest gifts I’ve ever been given.”

“I remember what it was like to not be able to express what I was thinking,” she said. “...I want to be kind and loving as I meet the needs of those whose brains work just a little differently than most. They are not less than anyone else; they simply have a brain that works a little differently than others. For a while, my brain worked differently too, so I understand in a small way what it is like.

“And these struggles are also nothing compared to what some people carry each and every day. We all have hurts that go unseen; mine just happens to be a brain injury. But with a good, loving, perfect and powerful God I know that He is working this for good and He will continue the work that He has started.”

For more information, contact **Nicole Chisari**, communications coordinator, at 803/323-2236 or chisarin@winthrop.edu.

[\[Back to Previous Page\]](#)

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