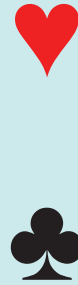


PLAYING THE HAND CLAUDIO MARTINEZ

BRIAN RANSOM



After five weeks in the uterus, a child's brain begins to develop. After four months its ears are formed enough to hear the world. At about eight months, the child begins to start putting on weight and preparing for birth – about half a pound a week. Finally, at nine months, the child is ready to be delivered. It takes nine months for a child to grow and develop in the uterus. For Claudio Martinez, it only took six.

Claudio was born three months prematurely with a disorder called cerebral palsy. At birth his wrist was about the girth of your finger, and for a while it was “touch-and-go”. The doctors predicted that he had six months to live, but six months passed, and then another six months, and he was released from the hospital at the age of one.

As Claudio explained it, having cerebral palsy is like having a light bulb hooked up to faulty wiring; the bulb flickers, regardless of what you replace it with, because it's the wiring that's causing the damage. He uses this analogy to describe the relationship between his nervous system and muscles; while he's able to work out and strengthen his muscles as much as he wants, it's the signals between his brain and muscles that are flickering – sometimes he's able to fully control his

body, other times not.

At the age of four, Claudio was enrolled in a first steps program, a center that provided specialized care for children with disabilities. At this time he couldn't walk, and the doctors said that he would never have full control of his legs to do so. At four years old he proved them wrong for a second time. He received a new type of surgery on his spinal cord at a St. Louis hospital; it was after this surgery that he was able to walk for the

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first time – for a few years with leg braces, and then on his own legs. Even with his physical disabilities, he was determined to never be treated differently than any of the other kids.

It was this determination that led him in fifth grade to undertake a mountainside hiking trip as a part of his Boy Scouts requirements. Being aware of his disability, his superiors told him that they would be able to find another way for him to meet the requirement, but Claudio was determined. After several arduous hours, he completed the hike, proving to himself and to others that he could do exactly what he set his mind to. He attributes this fortitude to his mother, who always made sure he knew that his attitude

not his circumstances that determined who he was. “It's not always about the cards that you've been dealt, rather how you play your hand in life,” he told me. In fact, not only has he succeeded in driving his own life for the better, but recently he's also begun to help shape the lives of others with similar conditions.

He decided to return to the first steps program to share his story. He gave the kids tips about things like dealing with bullies or making the most of what they are able to do physically. Afterwards, he remembers that a woman came up to him in tears and introduced him to her two-year-old son, who had severe developmental disabilities. She told him that his speech had given her “a light at the end of the tunnel.” Since that success, he's continued to spread his message of hope in speeches at other programs and schools, and views this project as a potential career path and definite passion throughout his life.

Now, 18 years old, Claudio has wrestled on the school team and helped devise plays for the football team. He's gone from not being able to walk to scaling a mountainside. He's changed the lives of dozens of others similar to himself through his speeches and brimming attitude. The truth is, although he's always sought to be treated the same as everyone else, he's not. He's stronger. What makes him different is the person that he decided to become, a person of great strength, leadership, and self-awareness. It's how he's decided to play the hand.

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Portrait of Claudio, Sophia Padgett-Perez, Photography