

# Lexi Youngberg

# INVINCIBLE

A HORRIFYING BOAT ACCIDENT, AN UNTHINKABLE TRAGEDY, AND A 16-YEAR-OLD GIRL'S FIERCE DETERMINATION TO GET HER LIFE BACK **BY TIM NEVILLE**

**T**he ear-splitting crash was so loud that the other boaters on Spring Lake heard it over the roar of their engines. Lexi Youngberg, 16, was riding on a small watercraft with two of her friends when suddenly a large motorboat collided with them. The boat smashed Lexi and her friends with its heavy **hull**, cutting them severely with its razor-sharp **propeller**.

It was a moment that nobody on Spring Lake that day would forget. For Lexi, it was the moment that changed her life forever.



AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT:  
**Facing Obstacles**

How does Lexi Youngberg approach the obstacles she faces in her life?

**NARRATIVE  
NONFICTION**  
Reads like fiction—  
but it's all true

# ABLE



Lexi Youngberg takes a jog on her "cheetah foot," which is specially designed for running.

## CRACK!

The day of the accident, September 5, 2009, was supposed to be the perfect end to the summer. In Lexi's hometown of Chicago, school had already started, but Lexi had returned to her family's cottage in Spring Lake, Michigan, for one last bit of warm-weather fun.

Lexi loved the outdoors and was an accomplished athlete. She was a runner, an ice skater, a skier, a **wakesurfer**, and a **wakeboarder**. She was also a star soccer player with a bright future on the field. Her varsity soccer team had just won the state championships at the beginning of the summer.

It was 7 p.m. and Lexi and her friends Robby, 15, and Kaitlin, 23, were headed home from a ride on a Sea-Doo, a small watercraft that looks like a floating motorcycle. Then suddenly, the Sea-Doo and a large motorboat driven by a

14-year-old boy slammed into each other. A thunderous CRACK! exploded across the lake. Boaters nearby knew immediately that something was terribly wrong.

Michelle Foltyniewicz, 20, and her dad were the first boaters at the scene. What they found was truly horrifying. The boy in the motorboat was OK. Kaitlin had only minor cuts. Robby, however, had been severely cut by the propeller. Lexi was floating facedown in the water, her shoulder pinned under the overturned Sea-Doo.

Without hesitating, Michelle threw on her life jacket, jumped overboard, and swam as fast as she could toward Lexi. She reached her in seconds and quickly turned her over. Lexi was breathing, but she was unconscious and her eyes were rolled back in her head. She had a deep cut on her skull, and her skin was so pale, it

looked like a white sheet. And then Michelle saw it: The lower part of Lexi's left leg, just below the knee, had been completely severed.

Robby was in even worse shape. A doctor rode up in another boat and worked frantically to save him, but it was too late. Robby died on the lake.

## Consumed by Grief

Lexi was hit on the head so hard that to this day, she doesn't remember the accident or the weeks that followed. She doesn't remember Michelle's father using a rope to tie a **tourniquet** around her stump to slow the bleeding. She doesn't remember being loaded into an ambulance and rushed to the hospital. She doesn't remember her heartbroken parents never leaving her side.



**ABOVE:** Staying positive during a grueling physical therapy session  
**LEFT:** Lexi gets a visit in the hospital from her friends. During her recovery, Lexi experienced phantom pain. She had feeling in her toes, even though her toes were gone. Doctors once thought phantom pain was psychological, but now they say these are real sensations that start in the spinal cord and brain.

Over the next two weeks, Lexi underwent nine surgeries and survived an infection—from the dirty lake water—that nearly killed her. Meanwhile, her head injury made it difficult to remember things, so her parents had to tell her more than once that she had lost her leg.

The first time she heard about the accident, she cried and said she didn't understand why she had survived and Robby had died. When she looked at her swollen, stitched-up leg, she was consumed by grief.

"I'll never be able to do anything again," Lexi told her mom.

But as the weeks passed, Lexi's memory began to improve. Her strength started to grow. She found strength and comfort in her faith in God. Her life had been spared, she thought, and now it was up to her to make the most of it.

So she made a decision: There would be no bitterness and no self-pity. It was time to put her life back together.

But how could she ever again do the things she loved? How would she play soccer with one leg?

## Moving Parts

Today, more than 2.5 million amputees live in the United States. An amputee is a person who has lost all or part of an arm or a leg.



**ABOVE:** Cameron Clapp lost his legs and his right arm in a train accident. Today he walks with a pair of high-tech robotic legs called C-Legs. Inside each leg is a sensor and a tiny computer that control the way the prosthetic moves. C-Legs do the walking for the walker! **INSET:** In 1900, artificial limbs like these were primitive and often painful for amputees to wear.

Many amputees wear artificial limbs called prosthetics.

Doctors told Lexi that once the swelling in her stump went down, she would be fitted with her own prosthetic. It was hoped that this artificial lower leg and foot, which would attach to her knee, would enable her to walk without crutches.

That was easier said than done.

Fake limbs have been in use for thousands of years. In the Middle Ages, knights who'd lost an arm in battle would strap on a fake one made of leather and iron that could hold a shield. But it wasn't until the Civil War that prosthetic

medicine—the science of artificial limbs—really began to develop. More than 30,000 amputations were performed on soldiers in that war. This led to a booming industry in wooden legs and arms. These devices were often **crude** and painful to wear, however, and few amputees could lead truly independent lives.

Prosthetics have slowly improved over the decades. And in the past 10 years, the science of prosthetics has thoroughly transformed the experience of many amputees. This progress has been fueled by tragedy: Hundreds of American





Many amputees wear “sleeves” like this one to prevent irritation. **BOTTOM:** Like many prosthetics, Lexi’s artificial leg looks like a real limb. (It’s the foot on the right.)



soldiers have lost limbs fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Determined to help these veterans, a new generation of scientists has **revolutionized** the field of prosthetics. Unlike the crude wooden pegs and metal hooks of the past, today’s artificial limbs are designed to work—and even look—like the real thing. Some have tiny computers that control them with absolute precision. Others are controlled by **neural** impulses, or brain waves, the same way real limbs are. On the leading edge are limbs with **synthetic** skin that feels warm to the touch.

Lexi’s prosthetics would not include such Transformers-esque technology. But they would be designed to fit her body perfectly, to work without causing her additional pain and, it was hoped, to help her be active and live as normal a life as possible.

Lexi, however, knew that a normal life was something she would never have again. But she wasn’t going to let that stop her from getting back to the things she loved.

### First Steps

By the end of November, Lexi was ready to get a prosthetic leg. Her doctor, David Rotter, **fashioned** a large suction cup that attaches just below the knee to the sides of what is left of her shin. This cup displaces the pressure of her weight away from the tender bottom of her stump, which is like one big scar. The skin is not tough,

like the skin on the heel of your foot, and putting weight directly on the stump would send bursts of pain shooting up Lexi's spine.

The suction cup attaches to a prosthetic leg. Lexi has several types of prosthetic legs. She has a water leg for swimming, showering, and wakeboarding, and an activity leg for daily wear and playing

soccer. She even has a special leg for dressing up in high heels.

At first, Lexi found that just standing up on her artificial leg was exhausting. Everything seemed out of balance. Amputees have to work much harder than other people to do the same tasks.

Lexi spent hours in physical therapy strengthening her body.

She especially worked to build her abdominal muscles, which are key for walking. She treated these physical therapy sessions like intense training for a sport.

Her hard work paid off.

In December, barely three months after the accident, Lexi walked to a high school dance.



## SPEECH

### “Finding a Joy in Overcoming Obstacles” By Helen Keller

I can remember the time before I learned to speak—how my thoughts used to beat against my fingertips like little birds striving to gain their freedom. Of course, it was not easy at first. . . . One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar. There were so many difficulties along the way, so many discouragements; but I kept on trying, knowing that patience and perseverance would win in the end.

And while I worked, I dreamed dreams, the pleasantest of which was of the time when I should talk like other people, and the thought of the pleasure it would give my mother to hear my voice. . . . So I want to say to those who are trying to learn to speak and those who are teaching them: Be of good cheer. Do not think of today's failures, but of the success that may come tomorrow. You will succeed if you persevere, and you will find a joy in overcoming obstacles—a delight in climbing rugged paths, which you would perhaps never know if you did not sometimes slip backward. Remember, no effort that we make to attain something beautiful is ever lost. Sometime, somewhere, somehow we shall find that which we seek.

—Helen Keller to the American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, July 8, 1896



Though she could not see or hear, Helen Keller became a highly accomplished writer and speaker.

## Forward Motion

It's been more than two years since the accident, and Lexi has moved on with her life. She just started school at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California. She has a boyfriend. Incredibly, she is back to skiing, back to playing soccer, and back to running—though she still struggles with these activities. For amputees, rehabilitation is lifelong. “There are still obstacles and frustrations everyday,” says Lexi. “But I try my best and give it my all.”

Most days, when Lexi looks at the stump that used to be her leg, she feels gratitude. She's thankful that modern science has allowed her to keep doing the things she loves. Of course, Lexi still misses Robby. But she believes that the best way to honor her friend is to live her life to the fullest. “You can't ask yourself why this happened, because it will make you crazy,” Lexi says. “People are inspired and given hope when you keep moving forward.”

So where is Lexi headed next? One day, she wants to be a physical



This prosthetic is waterproof, so Lexi can hit the waves whenever she wants. **What can you infer about Lexi from this photo?**

therapist and work with amputees. But first, she has her sights set on competing in the Paralympics, the Olympic Games for athletes with

disabilities.

Wherever Lexi decides to go in life, one thing is certain: Nothing is going to get in her way. ●

## CONTEST

### Writing About Obstacles

In Helen Keller's speech on page 9, she says, “You will succeed if you persevere, and you will find a joy in overcoming obstacles.” How does this idea apply to Lexi Youngberg? Explain your opinion in a paragraph. Use the photos and captions as well as details from the article to support your ideas. Send it to **LEXI CONTEST**. Five winners will each get a copy of Wendelin Van Draanen's novel *The Running Dream*. See page 2 for details.

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