2026 CSRF Danielle Reszenski Memorial Scholarship Recipient Essay Questions: Rebekka

Q: How has living with Cushing's Syndrome shaped your educational journey and future goals? What do you hope to achieve through your chosen field of study or trade?

My name is Rebekka. I am from Bakersfield, California and I had lived with Cushing's for what my endocrinologist believes was 10 years before my diagnosis and tumor resection. While, as I am sure you know, Cushing's came with many challenges, it also gave me the knowledge of an inner strength that I did not previously think I had. For a long time, I second-guessed myself. When my doctors told me I needed to lose weight, I told them I was trying and they looked skeptical, I even began to question if I was doing enough. I was planning my meals and working out five times a week and nothing was working, so I thought I must have been doing something wrong.

After I found out what Cushing's was, I knew that I had it. I was scared to talk to my doctor and have her dismiss my intuition. But I had to do it anyway. I knew that I would regret it if I didn't. That is the same way I felt about going back to school for my master's. In addition to that feeling, I knew I wanted to do something more for my community after having gone through my own rare disease.

After I graduate, I would like to create my own non-profit that helps other people who live in Kern County with the costs associated with diagnosing, treating, and recovering from a rare disease. The things that I am learning in my master's program are going to help me be a better leader and teach me how to run an organization successfully, so that hopefully I can help people who are as scared as I once was. I know that I felt really alone during my own journey with Cushing's, and having the financial burden of tests, surgeries, more tests, and doctors' appointments did not ease that lonely feeling. Sometimes it felt like Murphy's Law where everything that could go wrong did. I would like to help other people have something go right during this time and make them feel a little lighter.

Q: What challenges—personal, medical, financial, or educational—have you faced as a result of your diagnosis, and how have you worked to overcome them? What has helped you stay motivated or resilient throughout your experience?

In 2024 I was in my 10th year of trying to figure out my medical issues and why the treatments for PCOS and depression I was undergoing were not working. At my mom's request I went back to the doctor again. By this time in my Cushing's journey, I hated going to the doctor. I did not

know yet that I had Cushing's and every appointment was marked by my doctor telling me how important it was for me to try and lose weight.

In 2017 my Cushing's was incorrectly diagnosed as what is now known as PMOS, and the weight conversation was common course for every appointment. In a conversation with my doctor, I had told her that nothing was working. How I had tried metformin, spironolactone, and GLP-1s and nothing could help me lose weight, and if it did, I couldn't keep the weight off. My doctor told me that I needed to try along with those medications to try and lose weight, and I told her I was. She was at a loss and began listing conditions that had crossed her mind and the reasons she ruled them out. Most of the ones she listed were ruled out by lab work, but when she got to Cushing's she stated that since my weight was distributed over all my body and not just my torso, she did not believe I had Cushing's. I went home that evening and researched Cushing's and found that things that I thought were run-of-the-mill for me were symptoms. I thought my buffalo hump was genetic, that my stretch marks and high blood pressure were due to weight gain, as were my sleepless nights. I believed my anxiety was my own doing, and my excess hair growth was thanks to the genetics of one side of my family. I thought I lived a normal life and that everyone felt the same way I did, they must have just been better at managing it that I was.

As it turns out, the symptoms I was experiencing were not normal and all were signs of Cushing's. All the research I did made me feel a certain sense of peace. Like I had just found the reason I was struggling for 10+ years. I did it with my original diagnosis, surgery, and every test since. Knowing everything I can about my disease makes me feel more competence and peace about it all. I went back and asked my doctor to test me for Cushing's and although very skeptical, she did. My tests came back and long story short I was in the office of an endocrinologist very soon. Dr. Chandramahanti in Bakersfield has been so amazing since my first appointment, she let me ask as many questions as I needed to and she also let me know that Bakersfield did not have the medical facilities that I would need. The closest hospital to me that had a doctor who specialized in Cushing's was UCLA, so I had to get a referral to see Dr. Heaney.

For me, the hardest part of the whole process came after treatment. Most of my bills went to collections and I ended up selling my car at the time to pay them all off in a timely manner. My recovery, like many, was slow and wasn't great on my psyche. Along with my family's support, the thing that kept me going was hearing about other people's stories with Cushing's. I read articles and profiles about people I never met who knew what I was going through and were on the other side of it. I love being a part of a community that wants to help others. I love seeing Reddit and Facebook pages where Cushing's patients are giving others words of encouragement and are talking about tests and new updates when it comes to Cushing's. The connection over a shared experience helps give me hope.