

Meet the Finalists

Alicia
Ladera Ranch, CA
Living with UC

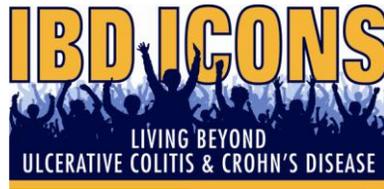


3 years old. That is how old I was when I was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis. But I do consider myself lucky that my case was diagnosed early and that I was able to experiment and adapt at an early age. Living with ulcerative colitis became "what I did," and I was determined not to let it stop me from achieving my goals as a student, athlete, and especially a normal kid. Athletics were always important to my family and I participated in soccer and gymnastics starting at the age of 4. By the time I was 12, I realized that my passion, and size, were more aligned to flipping and spinning as opposed to running. To be successful at this exciting sport of trampoline, I needed to be healthy and to control my UC.

Bouncing. Spinning. Twisting. The thought of doing this 20 feet in the air with a UC flare-up is overwhelming. Achievement required managing my time and especially managing the stress that triggers flare-ups. My passion to succeed at a sport I love enabled me to overcome this obstacle. In 2010, I won the US Junior National Trampoline Championship and represented the United States at the World Age-Group Championships in France, where I placed 5th among the top 17-18 year-olds in the world. This year, as a senior elite, I placed 4th in the US National Championships and was selected to the US National Trampoline team. I will represent the US at the World Cup in Denmark in October and at the World Championships in England in November. These achievements themselves are fulfilling, but when I consider the additional challenges of managing my UC, they are especially meaningful. Next, I am headed to college where I will pursue my academic goals while continuing to train and represent my country on the US National Trampoline team.

Alicia's message to other people newly diagnosed with IBD and those struggling with their condition:

Last year, I had the opportunity to see how learning that a child has ulcerative colitis affects parents. My gastroenterologist asked me to meet with a young girl and her parents to discuss how I manage my lifestyle. Their 8-year-old had just been diagnosed, and the powerful moment came as we were introduced and they realized that there was hope, and it was possible for their little girl to manage her disease and continue to pursue her dreams. I hope to continue to serve as an example to children by demonstrating that discipline, understanding, and acceptance are critical to living with UC. I would send a positive message that if you do your best to control UC, it hopefully will not control you!



Meet the Finalists

Ally

Vernon Hills, IL

Living with Crohn's disease



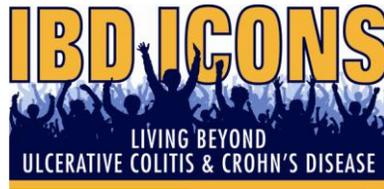
Through my experience with having had Crohn's disease for 10 years, I have discovered my voice, political purpose, and dream: to secure civil rights for people with disabilities and chronic illnesses. However, I did not immediately discover my voice as an advocate. At the time of my diagnosis, I was young and largely focused on understanding what it meant for a sickness to be chronic and incurable. When I was 11 years old, I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease. I had never heard of this disease and never could have anticipated how it would affect my life. Flare-ups would often cause me to miss school

because I was at home running to the bathroom, sometimes going as much as 40 times in one day. Much of my time in high school was spent trying to control the flare-ups, maintain my grades, and keep my friends despite the fluctuation in my weight and health.

When I was 14 years old, my mom and I were shopping when my disease began to flare. After learning that there were no public restrooms, we told the manager I had Crohn's disease. I begged him for permission to use the employee-only restroom, but he continued to deny my request, claiming he was making a managerial decision. Unfortunately, time ran out. Although no one knew about my accident, I felt helpless. As we left, my mom promised this would never happen to me, or anyone else again. I agreed, and called Illinois State Representative Ryg whom I had met 2 months earlier while on an eighth grade field trip to the state Capitol. Within months, I was helping Representative Ryg write a bill, stating that anyone with a medical emergency must be allowed access to an employee-only restroom. It passed unanimously through the committee, House, and Senate. In August 2005, the Illinois governor signed the bill into law as the Restroom Access Act, also known as Ally's Law. It became the first of its kind in the nation. Since its passage in Illinois, I have guided people in other states through the legislative process. Due to efforts nationwide, the law has passed in 11 other states and is pending in several more.

Ally's message to other people newly diagnosed with IBD and those struggling with their condition:

Although it may be difficult to speak about having IBD due to the symptoms and sometimes debilitating effects, it is important that we use our voices and share our stories to spread awareness and illustrate that we are not alone. Publicizing the condition removes the stigma, and as people become more educated, they grow more empathetic. Having IBD presents its share of hardships; however, it is important to take advantage of opportunities that can turn negative situations into positive outcomes. By becoming advocates and discovering our voices, we help ourselves, but more importantly, we help the estimated 1.4 million Americans with Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis. The voice of an advocate is more than the sound that comes from a person speaking; it is the passion, drive, and determination that can be heard and felt in between those words. When we gain the confidence to speak about the challenges that limit so many, we become dynamic participants in a culture of empowerment. In that culture, each of us, no matter what personal challenges we face, could fully realize our own potential without limits.



Meet the Finalists

Antonio
Lithonia, GA
Living with Crohn's disease

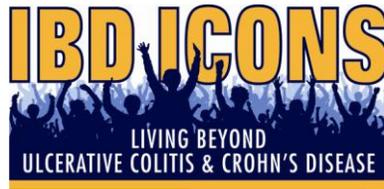


For 6 months doctors performed a plethora of CAT scans, MRIs, and ultrasounds trying to determine what was causing my severe abdominal pains, constant bowel movements, and a loss of 53 pounds in less than 2 months. Finally, I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease. I attended a performing arts high school with a double concentration in vocal music and theater. Just hours before the opening night of my last leading performance in our annual high school musical, I had a flare and was rushed to the Children's Hospital of Atlanta. Waiting for blood results in the hospital just 3 hours before curtain call, I knew that my personal remedy was the stage, the lights, and the audience. After an hour of tears, pleading, and disapprovals from my doctors, and many of my teachers, my mother finally caved and allowed me to perform that night. She, as well as the rest of my support system, knew that I needed that night to happen. From that night alone, I learned of the passion, determination, and strength that I possessed; and, most importantly, I discovered the love and support of my family, friends, teachers, and doctors.

My most prized accomplishment thus far as a junior in college is, not only, becoming President of the gay-straight alliance at my university, but also, during my presidency, establishing the first LGBT Pride Celebration for my university, as well as being the first to establish an event like this at an historically black college. I feel that my fight with Crohn's disease has done nothing but develop the strong, passionate, and determined individual that I am today! The pain and inconvenience that I have endured, and have watched others endure, has placed a fire under my bottom which will always send me over hills to advocate for all things right, learn from every battle won or lost, and experience this beautiful thing called life!

Antonio's message to other people newly diagnosed with IBD and those struggling with their condition:

If you are a person who has been diagnosed with IBD or any disease at all, always remember that we are human beings; and there is nothing alien about us! We have to stay strong and be determined. We must always practice optimism and promote peace, love, and happiness because what you give to this universe will be what you receive. And as diagnosed individuals, we deserve all of the peace, love, and happiness that the world has to offer.



Meet the Finalists

Danielle
Parachute, CO
Living with UC



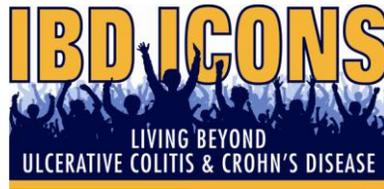
I was 13 years old when I was diagnosed with UC and it proved to be a life-changing experience. Because of the severity of the disease, doctors recommended I abandon all physical contact sports for a time. But I soon began to realize that I missed the competition that sports had provided. My sister persuaded me to enter the Miss Garfield County contest. I decided any competition was better than none. So I entered, and the real shock - I won. That began a year of fulfilling the Miss Garfield County obligations. I really enjoyed

volunteering in my county; and, at the same time, I began to promote public awareness of Crohn's and colitis. I became an active member of the CCFA, was awarded the National Local Hero award, have served as youth ambassador to my local chapter, and started the Take Steps Walk on the Western Slope of Colorado. So how has UC changed my life? I am a better person for it.

After high school, I wanted to go away to college to prove I could manage my health. I had to convince my mother and my doctor I could do this on my own. I was hospitalized after high school graduation, which did not help my case. Once I reached my doctor's pre-determined health goals, he gave his blessing and off to culinary school I went (a 23 hour drive from home). I loved culinary school, and I was diligent in my health management. But this disease does not always cooperate. I was hospitalized several times, but finally I graduated with an Associates degree in Baking & Pastry Arts with a 3.86 GPA. My first job was at a 4-star restaurant in Aspen, Colorado, and I loved it. Unfortunately my health again got in the way, and I had to go on medical leave. In April I had a surgery, which is getting me back on my feet. I have had many bumps in my road, but I appreciate my life more because of the difficulties.

Danielle's message to other people newly diagnosed with IBD and those struggling with their condition:

The first comment I make to others diagnosed with an IBD is that I empathize with you. Because truly none of us want sympathy, we want understanding. I recommend that you find doctors you can build a relationship with, because liking and respecting your doctors is very important. Also remember that you must be an active participant in your health, and when you need help – ask for it. When this life is over, we won't be remembered because we had IBD, we will be remembered by how well we lived with IBD, and the good we created in this world. We are not victims and we are not sufferers - WE ARE SURVIVORS. Lean on all of us because together we will live good lives and we will contribute to finding a cure.



Meet the Finalists

Doug
Glendale, CA
Living with Crohn's disease

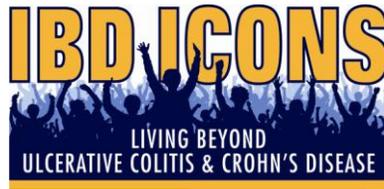


I will never allow Crohn's disease to define me. I have never allowed it to change who I am or what I believe. Instead of ICON, I prefer I Can! I can be a dedicated husband to a wife who has stood by me through 4 surgeries and always believed in me. I can be a father to a beautiful little girl, knowing that every step I make and every word I say will forever mold her into who she will become. I can be a little brother to 2 amazing sisters who have always supported me from near and far. I can be a son who, in his heart, never left home and always seems protected by the loving hands of his parents. I can overcome a disease that is at many times unpredictable and downright scary. I can battle the disease I've had since the age of 17 and never watch the world go by, but join in the trip. I can move across the country for a job in Hollywood, not worrying about how I will do it, but how I will never turn back. I can honestly say that having this disease has made me a better son, a better brother, a better husband, a better father, and most of all a better man.

I can go to Washington D.C. and be an advocate for the CCFA on their Day on the Hill. I can talk to our local government representatives and share my story in hopes of support for our national initiatives. I can share my story with other people around the country and not be afraid of their response, or what they will think of me. I can promote the research and development of medical breakthroughs to hopefully rid this world of this chronic condition. I can start a support group in my community and be sure no one is left behind. I can visit patients in the hospital and tell them that life can get better and will get better. I would have never had the courage to speak in front of people about this disease and how it has changed my life before this past year. Not only is that my biggest accomplishment, but the most rewarding.

Doug's message to other people newly diagnosed with IBD and those struggling with their condition:

I always believe I can do anything. If I can, you can! You can smile; You can laugh; You can sing; You can pray; You can cry; You can be scared; You can win; You can dream; You can accomplish; You can give back; You can trust people; You can fall and brush yourself off; You can travel the world; You can be who you want to be; You cannot give up; You cannot give in; You can live with this disease; You can grow with this disease; You can beat this disease! You can because I can!



Meet the Finalists

Elaine
McLean, VA
Living with Crohn's disease

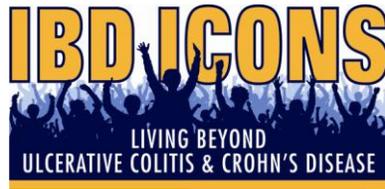


I was diagnosed with Crohn's in 1967 when I was 16 years old, just starting my senior year in high school. I had 3 surgeries in 6 months and missed 80 days of school. With a lot of love and support from my family, and hard work, I graduated at the top of my class and went on to college. But the Crohn's disease always came back. My lowest point came in my 20's. My marriage was ending, I had a baby, and no health insurance. I was having several obstructions a month and my GI told me that I had to have a resection. One week after the surgery, I took the LSAT. I scored in the 99th percentile and went off to law school — a single mom with a two-year-old daughter. Although the Crohn's returned again after starting my law career, it didn't stop me. I even re-married and had two more beautiful daughters in my 40s! So how has Crohn's disease affected my life? It's made me strong. It's made me reject the idea of defeat and negative thinking. Oddly enough, I think it's made me a better person -- more compassionate, more resilient -- than I would have been otherwise.

Becoming a partner at my law firm, where I've now worked for 27 years, and being a wife and mother of 3 beautiful daughters together represent my most prized accomplishment. It is hard to do both under the best of circumstances, but to do it while living with Crohn's is -- I suspect -- pretty unusual. I am a full-time litigator and still love to practice law. I try to serve as a mentor and role model to other women in the profession and am proud to say I've been recognized for helping to advance women in the legal profession. In fact, in October I will be receiving the Florence K. Murray Award from the National Association of Women Judges for this work.

Elaine's message to other people newly diagnosed with IBD and those struggling with their condition:

You are not your disease. You have a disease, and you must learn to live with it, but it does not define who you are. Do everything in your power to regain your health, but make sure to remember that there is more to life than illness. Always believe in yourself. You are capable of overcoming great obstacles and meeting great challenges if you maintain your faith in yourself. Surround yourself with people who love and understand you. Having a support group can be critically important to your recovery. Above all, don't give up hope. There are so many treatment options now, and every day we are getting closer to a cure.



Meet the Finalists

Katie
Kansas City, MO
Living with UC

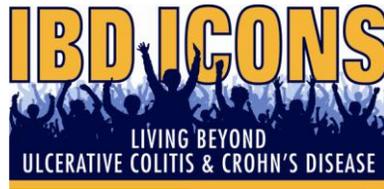


On a sunny August day almost 13 years ago, my world fell apart. That was the day my father passed away from complications of Crohn's disease. Almost exactly 4 years later, my worst fear came true when I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, a diagnosis later changed to ulcerative colitis. When I received my diagnosis, I thought my life was over. I had attended college on a Navy ROTC scholarship and was not sure what effect my diagnosis would have on my plans to serve as an officer in the Navy. I even told my fiancé (now husband) he could break off our engagement if he so chose, as I did not want him to experience the pain this disease inflicts on family members. He refused to and was by my side as we weathered my medical disqualification from military service, made new goals and plans, and made our way through a maze of medical bills and insurance claims.

While I miss my dad every single day, his absence is a continual reminder that I need to do what I can, when I can and enjoy every moment I have. I had always planned on attending law school after completing my naval service. It was too late to apply to law school after I was notified of my medical disqualification, so I worked a temporary job after college while I prepared my applications. During law school, I was a member of my school's law review and served on the law review's editorial board. I graduated law school in the top 15% of my class and am licensed in 2 states. Ulcerative colitis may be a part of who I am, but it does not completely define me.

Katie's message to other people newly diagnosed with IBD and those struggling with their condition:

Inflammatory bowel disease is part of my life. It has changed the way I see things but in a positive way. I have seen firsthand the worst that IBD can do. I know that it can be unpredictable; however, because of the unpredictability, I know that I have to seize the good days. Live in the "now". Find joy in the beauty of everyday life. Enjoy the good times when they come in order to get through the bad times.



Meet the Finalists

KerriAnn
Canton, MA
Living with Crohn's disease

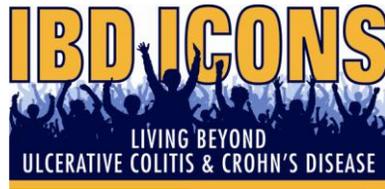


I thought I was your typical 17-year-old junior (minus the Crohn's) beginning her college search - but more than that I wanted to be in the Navy. I wanted to sail the world and follow in the footsteps of my grandfather. Naval Academy was my first choice. I received my letters, I had the grades, and I thought I was getting in. But then came the physical portion. Physically, I was fit, but because I had Crohn's disease I was too much of a risk, and medically disqualified. Back-up plan - Coast Guard Academy. Medically disqualified again. I was heartbroken. Then one day my mother came to me and said, "Why not go to the Massachusetts Maritime Academy? They work on ships. They work in the ocean. I bet you'll love it." Mom knows best. I fell in love with the campus, the school, and the regiment. I knew this was what I had wanted. I spent 60 days at sea per year. I went to the Caribbean, Europe – I was living my dream.

In June of 2007, I walked across the parade field at Massachusetts Maritime for the last time as a cadet and the first time as a United States Coast Guard Licensed Officer, Third Assistant Engineer. I had a job with ExxonMobil, one of the most coveted jobs in our field and was about to get on my first ship in 9 days. I had done it! With the help of my family and physicians, I sailed for 4 years. I went to Poland, Singapore, Malaysia, Labuan/Brunei, Alaska, California, Washington, Texas, Florida, Virginia, Maine, and many more places. Then in 2010 I got a flyer for Team Challenge. I started fundraising with an e-mail campaign where I told my story, which ended up on the Mass Maritime Parents Association website. Shortly after that I got a message from a freshman at Mass Maritime with UC. He was going through the same challenges as me, and when he read my story he said he realized "It can be done."

KerriAnn's message to other people newly diagnosed with IBD and those struggling with their condition:

Never let this disease get you down. Yes, there may be bumps in the road, but that is what life is all about. That's how you learn and grow. I had to get rejected twice before I found what was best for me (although I may not have known it at the time). Life has a way of working itself out, no matter how hurt, confused, or disappointed you may be with the way your life has come to be with IBD. Just like the freshman at Mass Maritime said, "It can be done."



Meet the Finalists

Todd
Ocean Township, NJ
Living with UC



Scene opens: In a taxi in New York City. My wife and I are celebrating our anniversary. It couldn't be more perfect. Then I look at my wife. She knows it's not the look of love of our 25 years together. This look is one of panic. What to do when nature calls spontaneously when you are in a taxi in the biggest city in the world with the fewest number of public restrooms in the world? Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a Starbucks. Decision time. We are stopped at a stop light and I make a break for it. Welcome to a day in the life of a UC patient. Of course every day is not filled with such stress-filled moments, but it is a constant effort of "what ifs?"

When living in NYC, I always used to walk to 1st Avenue to watch thousands run the Marathon. Being out of shape and having UC I figured it was for others to achieve. When my wife and I had our first (of 4) daughters, I gained more weight than my wife did. It took one very unflattering photo to wake me up from my self-pity and get control of my life. I went out and bought a treadmill, a pair of running shoes, and a book entitled "Marathon for Non-Runners". The only chapter missing from the book was how to run a marathon with UC. Imagine my fear of running 4-plus hours with very few bathrooms available. Fast forward 4 hours and 3 minutes to be proud to have finished my first marathon, but also relieved about not having an accident that would have tarnished the whole experience. This fall, I am running my sixth marathon. As with all the other races, I look forward to running past my kids holding up their handmade signs and showing them that nothing can stop you if you set your mind to it.

Todd's message to other people newly diagnosed with IBD and those struggling with their condition:

One thing that I've learned being a UC patient is to face every challenge and don't make excuses for not trying. For those who are newly diagnosed, the first thought shouldn't be "Why me?" but maybe "Why not me?" Things happen for a reason and sometimes we need challenges thrust upon us to make us the people we aspire to be. Fortunately modern medicine and technology are there to help, but when they aren't, that's where our family and friend support systems come in handy. We are not alone and can learn and inspire each other to be better than we thought we would ever be. IBD should stand for "I am Beating the Disease".