[Helmer, Conley & Kasselman Annual College Scholarship](https://www.helmerlegal.com/college-scholarship/)

Growing up I was surrounded by the love of multiple dogs. But one, in particular, changed my life and career path forever.

For most of my life, I did not have full use of my legs. I was born with a rare connective tissue disorder affecting the development of my lower extremities. As a result, I could not fully straighten my legs or point my toes, and my right leg was noticeably smaller than my left. Due to the lack of structural integrity, my kneecaps would fully dislocate with simple leg movements and become locked out of position. The pain was blinding, and dislocations often sent me crashing to the floor.

I learned many lessons about discrimination over the years. I was the eight-year-old cheerleader with bulky knee braces, the humiliated teen that would collapse without warning in the hallway with an unexpected dislocation, and the girl in a wheelchair that is too embarrassing for “friends” to socialize with. I endured countless whispers of “what’s wrong with her legs”. Friends left my life as fast as they entered and I was excluded from social and extracurricular activities. You would be very surprised at how cruel people can be when they have only known a life of health and privilege.

After years of consultations, I finally found a surgeon that could help. It would take four surgeries over three years, and the risks included severe infection and possible amputation. I had so much to lose if something went wrong, but I knew this was my best chance at a "normal" life. Thankfully, all four surgeries were successful.

During recovery, there was a lot of time to think. It is depressing watching your peers post photos of a typical high school experience. But lying in my hospital bed, I realized something. I was lucky. My disability had a cure. Many of my friends at the children's hospital were not as fortunate. Their determination against unbeatable odds inspired me to pay it forward. I wanted to help those without a medical answer to their disability. But how? I was confined to a wheelchair and could barely take care of myself. After much thought, I turned to my love of animals and joined the Seeing Eye as a dog raiser.

The Seeing Eye is a philanthropic organization that breeds and trains guide dogs for the blind. Dog raisers volunteer to foster a puppy for the first 18 months of life, teaching behavior patterns and handler commands specific to guide dogs. In addition, we familiarize the pups with everyday errands such as grocery shopping and riding public transportation. Once proficient, the dogs are called back for their final training and matched with a blind companion.

My mission is to help those in need regain the personal independence most take for granted. Our county chapter is diverse in all ages, races, and religions. We visit various churches, synagogues, schools, and community centers from Atlantic City to Manhattan promoting blind awareness. Our speaking events educate the public about what the blind community endures daily and how much a guide dog can change their world and provide independence.

I am commonly asked, "how can you give back your dog after so much time together?" I have successfully raised two dogs for the Seeing Eye, and it was gut-wrenching to say goodbye. However, knowing they will provide independence to a blind person previously excluded from everyday activities, as I once was, makes the heartache worth it.

My second guide dog was a very special German Shepherd named Masse. He was a "once in a lifetime" dog. That loyal soul who is forever at your side and the best friend you want to take wherever you go. Our work with the Seeing Eye outreach programs brought us to dozens of communities where I learned just how many disabled Americans are in need of help. Personally witnessing the everyday difficulty in which they navigate a world that was clearly not designed for them was life-changing. Because of these experiences with Masse, I have decided to pursue a career in law. My goal is to become a disability attorney and spend my life fighting for the most vulnerable among us.

Recovering from surgery, I had two goals. The first was getting back to school in person and reclaiming my spot on the cheer team. The second was preparing Masse for his call back to the Seeing Eye. I spent every day at physical therapy relearning how to walk, with Masse by my side every step of the way. I shortened my recovery time by almost a year, reclaimed my spot on the team, and was inducted into the National Honor Society with a 4.0 GPA. Mission #1 accomplished.

Weeks passed and I was down to my final days with Masse. We had one last Seeing Eye event planned, the annual Manhattan Walk. I was finally strong enough to attend, but unfortunately, it was canceled due to Covid. Sulking in my chair, Masse nudged me with his nose, as he so often did. He looked at me as if to say, get your coat, WE'RE GOING! I raced down the stairs, grabbed his vest, and we were on our way. We walked the city streets undeterred by the flashing lights, the honking traffic, and the subway rumbling below our feet. Nothing phased Masse. He was perfect!

Approaching the Empire State Building, Masse tucked to my side and sat. As we looked up at the iconic skyscraper, a sea of memories washed over me. I remembered every accomplishment we achieved and every hurdle we overcame to arrive at this perfect moment in time. And I saw the irony. I was supposed to be preparing Masse for his next chapter in life, but all the while he was preparing me for mine. Looking into his soft brown eyes, I knew Masse would fulfill his destiny… And so would I. "We made it Masse," I said. "We both made it."

Soon after, Masse was matched with an elderly blind gentleman in Illinois. Although I will never see him again I am thankful for everything he has given me. This journey made me a stronger person as I learned never to let obstacles keep me from achieving my goals. Though I am now 1,000 miles away at the University of Alabama I remain on as a Seeing Eye advisor to new puppy raisers and volunteer in local charity events such as St. Jude’s and Miracle Kids. I am very active in my sorority, holding multiple committee chairs and was recently named to the UA President’s List for outstanding academic achievement with a 4.0 GPA.

On my darkest day, my definition of disability never included the word incapable, which sadly is what many people believe. Overcoming my condition gave me a unique perspective on life and I consider it a gift. The feeling of being discriminated against because of a congenital disability still burns within me. That is why I have decided to become a disability attorney and spend my career serving the most vulnerable among us. I hope to improve the quality of life for those experiencing similar mistreatment. It is my goal to further disability legislation regarding building codes for both new and existing construction, as well as, employment opportunities, government programs, and mass transit accommodations. Although ADA laws have progressed over the past two decades, I believe there is much more work to be done