



FLAME YOUTH CONGRESS

Paralympian Stefanie Reid's Address

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I am so thankful everyday that I get to live out one of my dreams – to be a professional athlete. I have wanted to do this since I was five and competed in my first sports school day. I played everything from basketball, to cross country, to swimming, to ballet, and then at 12, I fell in love with rugby. It was my goal to play internationally. Things were on track and looking good, and then one day, when I was 16, everything changed forever.

I was at my friend's cottage for the weekend, and we decided to go tubing – that is when you attach an inner tube to a speed boat and get pulled over the water at high speeds. I had fallen off the tube and was waiting in the water, but the driver of our boat didn't see me, and I was accidentally run over. I got caught in the propellers, and had deep lacerations to my lower back and leg. I was scared. I could see it in everyone's face that it was bad.

We were hours away from the nearest hospital, and there was just too much blood. I remember lying in the ambulance, just praying. I was terrified to die because I knew in my heart that my life had not been pleasing to God. I didn't really know him. I had never even asked him what his plan for my life was. My life was all about me. I prayed for a second chance. God heard that prayer. He saved my life, and I was incredibly grateful...until I found out that there was a catch. In order to save my life, the surgeon had to amputate part of my right leg. My thankfulness quickly dissolved – I was absolutely devastated. I didn't want to live if I couldn't pursue my dream. I didn't want to always look differently from everyone else.

But I gave God the benefit of the doubt, and through my grief and devastation, I trusted him. But it was confusing. Why would God bless me with passion and ability for sport, only to take it away? How was I still going to be me? Would I still enjoy life? Over the next few months and years, God revealed to me that he put my drive and love for competition in me for a reason. I didn't need to change, I just needed to apply it in a different way. So I put my energy and drive into my schoolwork, and earned a full academic scholarship to university to study biochemistry. I competed on the trivia team, and the chess team – as you can imagine I was very cool – and I developed a new goal, to be a surgeon. I was happy, and I was fulfilled. Then, when I was at uni, I happened to walk by an athletics practice, and something inside of me just clicked – I wanted to know how fast I still was. I started off practicing once or twice a week, eventually progressing to full training six days a week. Opportunities to compete internationally kept cropping up, and finally, I had to make a decision, to pursue athletics professionally, or go to medical school. I couldn't believe that God would have brought me this far in athletics to just walk away from it, so I decided to take the road less travelled. 12 years ago, lying in my hospital bed, being a professional runner was the last thing I expected of my life. But we serve a mighty God.

I know every one of you here has dreams and passions. Don't ignore them. They are good, and God created you with them for a reason. The tricky part is finding out what to do with them. There is no formula for it, I can't give you a 5 step approach. Everyone's journey will be different, and you will have to work it out for yourself in prayer, and with wise council from your peers and elders. The best piece of advice I can give you is to be open to God's plan. He thinks on a bigger scale than we do, and he can see the whole picture.

So this summer, I hope you do watch the Paralympics and draw inspiration from it. God is not limited by things like physical disabilities, or social stigmas, things that we may see as limitations. Or, even better, get involved and experience the Games firsthand with opportunities like the Joshua Camp. It is my hope for you, that when you look at your life, what you will see are endless possibilities, and that you will have the courage and determination to pursue them.

Stefanie Reid

Paralympic long jumper and sprinter