

On June 3, 2016, I walked into the Louis and Freda Stile Athletic Field House in Akron, Ohio, as one of the top-ranked wrestlers in the country. Today was the day I was wrestling to earn a spot to represent the United States at the World Championships. I was in the best shape of my entire life. I could bench 300 pounds, squat 500 pounds, and run under a 5-minute mile. I trained for this moment since kindergarten, and I felt ready to take on the entire world. After I heard my name announced over the loudspeaker, I began heading to my mat of competition. This first match was supposed to be a stepping-stone towards my goal of becoming a World Champion. Instead, it resulted in a shattered C-4 vertebra, damaged spinal cord, and a near-death sentence.

Specifically, a routine headlock that I had executed flawlessly countless times in previous competitions went awry. All of my and my opponent's weight came down directly on my forehead, which subsequently drove 400 pounds of force through my neck into the ground. This maneuver immediately left me motionless in the center of the arena. I kept trying to tell myself to stand up, but I couldn't move or speak. All I could do was look around and see my coaches panicking. I was in a trance, and by the time I had regrouped, a doctor had already log-rolled my limp body and fastened my neck in an unmovable neck brace. Within minutes, I was placed on a stretcher, rushed out of the arena, and transported to Akron Children's Hospital to undergo a series of tests.

After an excruciating X-Ray and MRI, a Neurosurgeon named Dr. Tsulee Chen walked into my room and delivered devastating and life-altering news. She said, "Ian, you have shattered your C-4 vertebra in your neck and injured your spinal cord. This injury has left you paralyzed from the chest down, and we need to perform emergency surgery to stabilize your neck. These procedures are extremely high-risk, and you have a 50% chance of survival.". As a 16-year-old, this was not the news I was hoping for, but surgery was my only choice. That night, I underwent a 14-hour surgery to replace my fractured vertebrae with a piece of titanium and a half-dozen screws.

Following the procedure, I spent weeks in a medically induced coma and four months in multiple hospitals fighting for my life. During these dark days, the grim and desolate hospital became my home,

and I spent countless hours failing and struggling in physical therapy before I could learn how to live life in a wheelchair. After finally gaining enough strength to leave the hospital, I returned home and reenrolled in high school. Unfortunately, even though this transition was supposed to be a step in the right direction, many physical and legislative roadblocks halted my return to the classroom.

Since my high school was a religious and private institution, it wasn't required to adhere to the regulations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Rehabilitation Act, or the ADA. This discovery was highly problematic because my school wasn't handicap accessible, and I initially had no assistive technology to complete basic tasks. Even though this experience made my last 1.5 years of school strenuous and overwhelming, these events opened my eyes to the downfalls of disability policy and sparked my advocacy journey and interest in law.

After overcoming these obstacles, I have since worked in the public sector with organizations like RespectAbility, the Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation, the Miami-Dade School Board, and former Congresswoman Donna Shalala to better understand the nuances of disability policy at both the local and federal levels. Additionally, I founded the DefIANt Scholars Program and raised over \$50,000 to help create opportunities and funnel talented individuals with disabilities into higher education. Even though my work in the public sector has been fruitful and impactful, there are still monumental policy-induced roadblocks the disability community faces daily. These legislative challenges are what drives me and what have drawn me to Harvard Law School. At Harvard, I will expand on my policy background and strive to create more equitable opportunities for the disability community and individuals like myself.

Although I grapple daily with my paralysis, I have not let my injury limit or define me. Since June 3, 2016, I have used the passion and drive that was instilled in me through my athletic past to help me overcome my disability and become a scholar and advocate. Although some may view my accident as a tragedy, I tend to view my situation as a springboard that has allowed me to help others. As a Harvard Law Student, I will continue to use my resiliency and platform to make systemic changes that will benefit and impact the lives of the 61 million Americans currently living with a disability.