

“Run Jenna, run” I heard my friend screaming at me. I turned around to find a huge man sprinting after me. I jumped over the guardrail on Pacific Coast Highway trying to get away when I felt his hands on my inner thigh pulling me towards him. Terrified for my life, I thought this is it, I’m going to die. Not knowing this man’s intentions, my thoughts raced to is he going to rape me, murder me, kidnap me or is he part of a human trafficking ring.

In the early morning hours of January 4, 2021, I was a victim of a violent crime.

It was my last day of break before the new quarter at UCLA. I went to Malibu with my friend Rudy to go on the sand dunes. Our car got stuck and we called AAA. When they arrived, another car pulled up and parked right next to us and watched us for around 20 minutes. The tow truck driver asked him why he was there and he was silent and just stared at us.

Once we were able to leave, we immediately got a call from the tow truck driver telling us he saw the guy jump in his car and speed after us. Moments later the man’s car went into oncoming traffic and purposefully hit the drivers’ side of our car totaling it and slamming us into the guardrail deploying the airbags. We were trapped with both doors jammed shut. I was able to climb out of the passenger side and I started running. I hopped over the guardrail to run down the mountain when I realized it was a 30- foot cliff. The man caught up and grabbed me and pinned me against him and the cliff. Fear struck my body. The most intense fear I had ever felt.

Rudy was able to climb out and sprinted towards us and started punching the guy. I was able to break free and run. I flagged down a car and they stopped to help me and called 9-1-1. The police arrived and determined he was driving a stolen car (stolen 4 miles from my apartment at UCLA). They caught him breaking into a motorhome nearby and he was taken to jail. He was released 48 hours later with no bail and no charges filed against him.

This event has changed my life forever. I suffered a TBI, bulged disk in my neck, knee pain, cuts and scrapes on my hands, legs and feet, a lower back injury as well as PTSD and severe emotional trauma. My first day of school was met with severe panic attacks and crying spells. I thought I would be fine after a few days. A few days turned into today. Today I still struggle with this accident and to be in my own body. I moved out of my apartment and back home after finding out my attacker was an active gang member.

With the resources available to me at UCLA, along with working with the Dean, crisis counselors and my professors I remained in school despite the trauma. As horrible as this event was, I now am very confident in my choice to go into the medical field. I have a strong desire to help others and this event gave me the clarity to know that I am on the right path for my future.

My field of study is psychobiology with a minor in brain and behavioral health. This has pushed me to take action. I immediately started interning for the Bresee Foundation, an organization that helps battle poverty by empowering youth. I work specifically in the gang reduction unit tutoring and mentoring kids. I also will be teaching classes once a week which includes exercising, Jiu Jitsu techniques, and ends with meditative yoga. I have been practicing Jiu Jitsu for 3 years and I believe these skills helped me have the tools to know what to do when I was attacked. I plan to continue working with this organization and create an after-school activity for self-defense to further empower the students.

While I did suffer from a traumatic brain injury from this accident, sadly this is not my first one. When I was 14, I suffered a TBI with 3 subarachnoid hemorrhages when I fell off a horse, resulting in my loss of consciousness, forgetting who my friends and family were for 8 hours, and a year-long recovery. I understand how difficult these accidents can be driving me to want to help people who have also suffered from traumatic accidents.

I am currently the safety and travel coordinator and a competitor for the UCLA Brazilian Jiu Jitsu Club team, a member of the UCLA Sports Medicine Club and the UCLA Tutoring for Heroes Club where I tutor children of health care workers who are on the front line.

My long-term goals include going to graduate school to work with survivors of trauma experiences. I want to provide therapy to these individuals because I truly can empathize and understand how difficult these situations can be, but I also understand that they do not need to last forever. I want to empower others as I have been through doing my therapy sessions.

While the car may be completely totaled and “dead”, I am not. I am here to share my story and work to empower others. Although this accident was horrific, I can see the silver linings in it as I recover from my head injury and trauma.

In the summer of 2020, I decided I wanted to further make an impact in my community, and I became an EMT and got a job as a Covid tester. Due to the TBI, PTSD, and physical injuries, I was unable to continue working.

If awarded this scholarship, it will allow me to work on healing without the pressure to find another job. It will help me with my tuition, housing as well as books and supplies needed for school.