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Second Place

There's something about middle school hallways that holds an element of intimidation. If the walls could talk, they'd be saying, "Who are you? Why are you important? What makes you special?"

We are told from the moment we are born that we are unique, unlike anyone else. It's up to us to decide if this distinction is for better or worse. Better yet, it's up to us to decide just how we're going to stand out. But when you're an 11-year-old and you don't know what it is that makes you special, your middle school hallways may as well be hell.

The teenage girls standing in their cliques between classes are either chatting about the latest gossip or planning their upcoming weekend sleepover. They thrive off of their similarities as they talk the same, dress the same, act the same, think the same. They don't need their uniqueness to give them a sense of purpose or pride. They have their popularity to carry them.

I walk past them on my way to my first period class; them wearing their Abercrombie and Fitch jeans, me wearing my Aeropostale jeans. Jeans are jeans, you may think, but Abercrombie jeans are more expensive, therefore better. Everyone in my middle school knows that.

Hot pink glasses, a small yet noticeable front-tooth gap, a petite, boney build, and eyes constantly searching the halls for a friend—this was me in the fall of 2007. I wish I had known that one month into middle school, a simple fitness test would come along that would alter my sense of purpose in these teenage crowds.

The first fitness test in our physical education class was known as the universally dreaded "gym class mile". Everyone was to run the mile as fast as they could, including our gym teacher Mr. Chapman. There was a joke at the time that served to increase the stakes at hand by either motivating students or intimidating them; 11 years later and I'm still not sure which one. Whoever could beat Mr. Chapman in this race was awarded the chance to assign him 50 pushups, on the spot.

Mr. Chapman had the athletic build of Channing Tatum. He was in his late 30s, yet active and toned. And compared to my pre-pubescent self, he could definitely beat me in this race if he really wanted to. However, as soon as that starting whistle was blown, I was unstoppable.

See, while Mr. Chapman was racing us to encourage some sense of comic relief, I was racing Mr. Chapman to prove him wrong. I was racing my classmates to show them that I was fast. But most importantly, I was racing the clock to give myself something to be proud of.

I can still remember that rush of adrenaline. I remember the feeling of fatigue at 800 meters in combination with an unparalleled desire to win. As soon as the race started, I knew I was onto something. "This..." I remember thinking, "...this is what I'm supposed to be good at. This is what makes me special."

That same day I overheard my middle school crush talking with one of my friends about how difficult the middle school mile was. My friend, knowing about my crush on him, willingly invited me into the conversation.

“Laura beat Mr. Chapman!” she said to him. “Can you believe that?”

“No way! Did you really, Laura? How fast did you run?”

I could feel the anticipation in the room. At this point, the whole class was looking at me, their eyes like laser beams on my back. Only this time, those eyes weren’t looking at my hot pink glasses or front-tooth gap.

“Six-something,” I say with a shy smile and a timid tone.

“Six minutes and seven seconds!” my friend says with a boisterous sense of second-hand pride.

“Yeah,” I said, “but I didn’t even mean to run that fast. I was really just trying to beat Mr. Chapman!”

Eleven years later, I’ll never forget why I run:

I run because I’m good at it. I run because it’s the closest thing to flying. I run because this sport showed me my identity when I was drowning in uncertainty. So, when it really comes down to it, I run because this sport gave me a voice when I didn’t have one.