

Stroke After Stroke

By: Maya Slabodkin

Swimming isn't just a sport. Swimming is my life. My name is Elias Wiener. I currently live in the suburbs of downtown Washington D.C, in the state of Maryland. I began swimming when I was just three-years old. When I start swimming, every thought and worry in my foggy mind starts to go away and begins to vanish in the water. Ever since I was little, I've always wanted to beat the world record for the fastest five-hundred front-crawl. I am currently twenty-one and still working towards my goal.

Every day after class, I go down to the campus pool and practice swimming for a minimum of five hours each day. Every time I go to practice, there's always this old guy named Shelly swimming next to me in the other lane. I think to myself every day, why is this guy would still be swimming when he's only going to die soon? Until one day everything changed.

Here I am, getting ready to swim for another five hours in the frigid, cold, and empty pool. Shelly comes running in through the glassy and shiny doors of the pool and starts blowing his whistle. He tells me to listen up. "Listen kid, I used to be a competitive swimmer like you. I would practice for hours and hours every day to beat the world record like you are doing now, until I contracted polio in my early thirties, and everything that I had ever dreamed of had vanished away, like a bottle thrown into the ocean". I was speechless. My mouth started to get dry and I didn't even realize that I started to choke on pool water. I quickly reassured myself, got out of the barren pool, and went to go meet and sit down with this-now not stranger-I called Shelly. I first started out to tell him where I grew up, where I went to school, and why I began to have a passion for swimming. He told me that I was exactly like him when he was my age, and that he would help me beat the world record for a five-hundred front-crawl. Not just as one, but as a team.

"Ding, ding, ding!". Finally, the school day was over, and I could finally go over to the pool and meet with Shelly to accomplish my goals. "FWEEEEEEEEEE..." a whistle would go, and I would know that Shelly was there waiting for me. I guess now, that this was our call to let each other know we were both there. Shelly told me to first get on my sneakers and take twenty laps around the campus. At first, I thought this guy was crazy, but I did as Shelly said. Waiting for Shelly to blow his whistle, the hairs on my legs and arms went up, and I could feel goose-bumps forming on my whole entire body. It was the beginning of February, and I was freezing cold with only a pair of shorts, a shirt, and sneakers on my

feet. His whistle started to blow as loud as the sirens downtown. Shelly began to time me, and I felt so pressured and anxious, that I just fell over my un-tied laces, and laid on the cold, icy, and snowy ground. Shelly yelled at me to get up, and told me that the first step to being a good swimmer, is to not be afraid of anything. Those words sawed into my brain, and I began to get up rapidly and started to run again. I could only run about ten laps, until my heart gave out. I slowly came to a stop, fell down to only scrape my rose colored knees. Shelly sighed, rolled his eyes, and went out the door, only to drive home.

As I woke up the next morning, the only thought that was going through my sleepy mind, was how much I must've disappointed Shelly with no effort given into yesterday's practice. Today was another day, I had thought to myself, so I quickly got on my swim trunks and went down to the pool. I could see a man with a cup of hot coffee, with steam coming out from the cup, and a crumpled newspaper in his hands. Sure enough, it was Shelly. Shelly told me to take a seat, because he needed to talk to me about something. Shelly had asked me about my family. My face started to get red, my heart started to beat, and my body started to shake all over. I had told him that my mom was an alcoholic, my dad was an abusive father, my older brother had died in a car crash when he was only sixteen-years old, and that none of my family had ever believed in me for anything that I wanted to accomplish. Shelly took my hand, looked at me in the eyes, and tears started to form from underneath his baggy eyes. Shelly began to explain to me how much alike his family was to mine. He just sat there with a slumped back, teary eyes, and had nothing else to say. Shelly and I sat there with tears in both of our eyes for about twenty minutes, until we both realized that it was time to get to work, to show our families and the world that we were something.

The world record championship was getting closer and closer. Time was running out; I knew that I had to step up my game. It had been fifty days since our first practice together, and I could feel myself getting stronger and stronger. Because of the motivation that Shelly brought to me, I could finally run twenty laps around the campus. Shelly was the father that I never had. He believed in me, helped me push to achieve my goals, and just overalld loved me for who I was.

Days came and went, and I felt that I was ready for the world record championships, but Shelly told me that there was one more thing that I needed to do in order to be ready to give it all at the championships. Shelly told me that I must go meet with my parents, and to forgive them. I completely, without a thought, rejected his idea, and went back into the pool. Shelly got in the water with me, and told me that anger only makes one weaker. I couldn't fight with Shelly, because that would just break my heart, so I got out of the pool, dried off my damp skin, and dashed to my car with Shelly.

I stepped out of my rickety car. As frightened as a mouse from a cat, I stared blankly at my parents' doorsteps to the old house in which I grew up in. I anxiously rang the doorbell while Shelly sat in my car. I heard screaming and badgering between the cracks in my front door, and I knew right away, that it was just like the old times, when I was coming home from middle school. My still drunken and very pale mother opened the cracked door, and just stared at me briefly for about a minute. She couldn't believe it was actually me. She welcomed me in, and all I could see was the house covered in beer and wine bottles. My father came into the room, and we all started to sit down very steadily onto the ripped and filthy couches. We heard a big boom from outside. It was my car. Shelly was in there. All I could hear was loud sirens and blinding and coruscating lights bouncing off of all the vague houses in the neighborhood.

Here I am sitting in the waiting room of The George Washington University Hospital waiting to hear if Shelly is going to make it. I impatiently pace back and forth in the little space I have in the waiting room. Finally, Dr. Stevens comes out and shares with me the news. Shelly did not make it. My heart sank like an anchor, and I just started running out of the hospital, and kept running and running until I reached the campus pool. I spent the rest of the night there sobbing my eyes out and swimming my heart out.

Today was the big day. It was the day to show who I was, and what I've been working towards for all of my life. The first steps I took into the baronial building were springy steps. I rushed quickly to the sign-in desk, and put my name down. I got changed into my still wet, and very tight bathing suit, and got ready to give all that I had in me. Before I knew it, my name was called. As I sat nervously in the Olympic-sized pool, all I could think about was Shelly. How much time and effort he gave in with me that he could've done better things with his life.

The timer starts to count down, my heart now beating as fast as a rabbit, my body starting to explode with encouragement, I take my start and blast off the wall as fast as a rocket. There was nothing to think about in this moment, only to win.

I pop my head out of the deep water, look up, and realize that I've done it, I've beaten the world record for the fastest five-hundred front-crawl. I raise my tired and sore body out of the water to see my parents' standing right in front of me, to congratulate me. All of my bad memories go away, and all I could think about now was Shelly. There it was, a gold, bright, and sharp medal. As the medal is being placed around my achy neck, I came to the conclusion that I didn't deserve this medal.

I run as fast as a road-runner to my car, and drive to the cemetery in which Shelly was buried in. I park my car on the dull and dead grass and walk rapidly to Shelly's sepulcher. I take my medal off my neck and place it on Shelly's grave. I fall down on my weary knees on the mud right in front of Shelly's grave and start to stutter, "This...was all you Shelly, you are my hero. You have brought me and my family closer together. I hope you....c...a...n hear me right now. There's not enough words to describe how much you mean to me and how much you've and helped me. I love you Shelly, and always will".