

Hang Ups

Dangling about 30 feet above the ground, I looked down on the entire neighborhood park with its rolling hills, vibrant green grass, and multiple tall eucalyptus trees. Buckled tightly in my brand new Diamond Mountain climbing harness, I admired my handiwork.

My old blue-and-black braided climbing rope thrown over a branch held me aloft, while a slipknot I tied while hoisting myself up prevented my descent. After a few minutes, I decided to return to the ground, but realized my knot grew too tight for me to untie. I was stuck.

Ever since my dad taught me the Bowline in second grade, the intricacy of knots has fascinated me. I spent hours mastering the craft, reading every knot book and website I could get my hands on. All my knots usually came in handy. In 8th grade, I won a competition in the Boy Scouts with a square knot, beating the instructor who taught an alternative knot that took longer to tie. A couple years later, I rescued my brother's pickup out of the mud with the unbreakable loop of the Bow Line during one of our off-road adventures. I even returned a stranded rock climber's lifeline by tying a Sheep's Bend between a small piece of paracord and his climbing rope.

Ironically, on the day I got stuck in the tree, I spent all morning trying to finally conquer the biggest and baddest knot of them all: the Monkey's Fist. After at least 50 failed attempts at the step-by-step process, my trusty blue rope finally bore the complex, dense sphere of rope. With a heavy Monkey's Fist on the end of my rope, I could throw an end over any branch.

After hoisting myself into the treetops that day I dangled for several hours due to that hastily tied Slip Knot. When my dad finally returned from work and saw me, he lugged over an extension ladder, and laughed as he untied me from the tangle he inspired years earlier.

When I reflected on this adventure, I realized another irony in the situation: It took a complex knot like the Monkey's First to elevate me into the tree, but a simple Slip Knot stopped me from getting back down. Comparing these knots, I learned that the effort and persistence I invest in a challenge like tying a knot translates into a certain lasting power.

A Slip Knot is extremely easy to tie, but disappears with a quick pull on the rope. However, a Monkey's Fist takes hours to learn and minutes to tie, but is impossible to untie. In so many other parts of my life I have experienced this similar relationship: that the more I try, the more useful and permanent the reward.

I expect that my knot-tying adventures, and the related lessons, even the most embarrassing ones, will help me through any future hang ups I encounter from here on out.

A Small World

While grabbing lunch between games at a water polo tournament, I noticed one of my new teammates rarely looked me in the eye. Instead of taking the empty seat next to me, he opted to sit across the table. Even when I tried to start a conversation with him, he only looked down, and mumbled, "Oh, hey," and walked away. This type of cold-shoulder treatment wasn't new to me. I'm a big guy. In bare feet, I'm about 6 feet 7 inches tall, and I'm pushing 300 pounds. Yes, it can be a pain. I bump my head going through doorways, I don't fit in most mid-size cars, and I can barely squeeze into most classroom desks. But I understand that the world is made for average-sized people, and I like to think I'm above average. One thing, however, is hard for me to take: People who don't know me assume I'm mean.

Like my frosty water polo teammate. I understand why he was intimidated by me, especially since he was one of the smaller players. I would have felt the same way. When I meet people for the first time, I often draw conclusions or make assumptions. Almost all my life, I've had to deal with the expectations and judgments people make about me just because I'm often the largest kid in the room. Ever since I was a kid there has been pressure for me to perform athletically because of my size and strength.

When I went to grocery store, random people consistently asked me if I played football. When I told them, "No," the men always lectured me not only about why I should play football, but what I should be doing with my life, with my body, and with my potential. I normally just nodded and smiled, but it bothered me that they thought they knew what was best for me.

Not only did I never play football, but I defied many of the assumptions people made about me. How many people my size love nothing more than mixing up a chocolate batter, and decorating a three-layer cake? Beside my passion for baking, I also love working with little kids. For the last two summers, I volunteered at a camp where I taught kids how to surf. My nickname was Teddy Bear. And if I wanted to make my friends fall on the ground laughing, I reminded them of my dream to learn to play the violin.

In general, I ignore what people say to me or think about me when it comes to my size. Instead of reacting, I usually just give them a smile. On many levels, there are advantages to towering over most of the world. I always get the front seat since I don't fit in the back. No one even dares call "shotgun." I usually have the best seat in the house, whether it's a rock concert or a ball game, no matter where I sit. And if people are getting rowdy and making my friends uncomfortable, all I need to do is step in the middle and simply ask, "What's going on?" and they disperse.

Even the people who are intimidated at first by me eventually come around once they get to know me. Like the water polo player at the restaurant. Within about two weeks, we finally had a conversation and ended up finding we had a lot in common. In fact, he ended up as my best friend. For me, it is a small world after all, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

Skating Through Hard Times

I was in fifth grade eating breakfast with my family when the floor of my home gave way under our feet. We barely escaped from the house before it buckled into two pieces, and ran to safety before the entire hillside gave way. Our home was destroyed, and we narrowly escaped with our lives.

Six years ago, my family was caught in this terrifying landslide when my home and a dozen others slid down the side of a canyon in Laguna Beach. Within less than 10 minutes, my life literally fell out from under me. For the next five years, my family moved over a dozen times, often living out of boxes with friends and relatives. Besides my clothes and basic necessities, the only thing I hauled from house to house was my collection of skateboards.

Six months after the landslide, the city of Laguna Beach relocated us to a recycled trailer on a parking lot at the end of town so my parents could save money to rebuild our home. I see it now as an extremely generous gesture but at the time it was difficult. Living in this dilapidated, thin-walled trailer was definitely not the life I had envisioned. My backyard was an enormous parking lot.

As a lifelong skateboarder, however, that flat expanse of asphalt helped me get through the hardest years of my life. You see, I'm a skater from a hillside neighborhood and had never experienced such space and opportunity. I took advantage of the situation and made this neglected, dirty parking lot into a skateboarding oasis with ramps and rails that my friends donated.

We would all gather together after school as a release from the pressures of life for a while, practicing trick after trick, working to fine-tune each maneuver. Contests were created, videos shot, and movies made.

For the first time in my life, I had a flat area where my friends and I could hang out. Even though we didn't talk much about the landslide, these friendships were both a distraction and softened the unpleasant living situation. Also, balancing sports and loads of homework, I turned to what I thought of as my new backyard skate park at night to escape from reality each day. The sense of riding back and forth on a cold night helped me relax and persevere through my studies and life in general.

Numerous years passed in that cramped rickety, old trailer and life wore on dealing with everything from highway noise reverberating right outside our door to the constant rodent problem. When my family's new, hillside home finally came to completion at Christmas last year, I was more than ready to move.

The only thing I would miss from my five-year ordeal was my beloved "skate park." After moving into our permanent home, the crazy life I endured since fifth grade was now over and even though I could not bring the skate ramps themselves, I was able to bring plenty of memories.

One of the most important lessons I learned through all this is that I have the ability to find positive opportunities even in the grimmest circumstances. If I could find friendship, support and fun in a parking lot, I know I can find the upside to almost any situation.