

# Unexplained pain

## Junior Hannah MacDonald stays positive despite 16 months of chronic pain

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Junior Hannah MacDonald knows the exact day it started.

It was Sept. 26, the day she and her parents moved into their new house in Tampa. They'd spent the entire day hauling boxes and unpacking, but now it was time for the swim meet.

MacDonald felt uneasy. She'd never driven to a swim meet without the rest of the team before, but she'd skipped the spaghetti dinner to help unpack.

As she and her mom neared Jesuit, she felt a piercing pain in both of her feet, like needles in her flesh. She told her mom, who assured her that it was just soreness from moving. Surely, her feet would feel better once she dipped them in the cold pool water.

They parked far away from the pool. MacDonald saw the gate in the distance and groaned. She didn't think she was physically capable of walking that far. When she reached the pool deck – with much difficulty – she looked down at her feet. They were both blue.

Three weeks later, she fell off a treadmill and dislocated both of her knees. After that, she got into a car accident. "Everything hurt" and the pain in her feet went unnoticed. To her peers, she was "bad luck Hannah," always injured and always in pain.

When the last of her injuries from the car accident faded, she noticed that the pain in her feet remained and every time she sat still for a prolonged period of time, they turned blue again.

### No luck yet

In March, MacDonald went to an orthopedic doctor because the pain persisted.

"We thought it was stress fractures or something simple like that, but [the orthopedist] didn't find anything. [The orthopedist] sent us to spinal intervention, and [spinal intervention] sent us to rheumatology, and it gets all confusing," MacDonald said. "Now, I've seen so many doctors and nobody knows what's wrong."

The scenario is the same each time. MacDonald goes to a new doctor's office, lets her feet dangle off of the examination table and waits for them to turn blue (the doctors never believe her until she shows them).

After just a few minutes, they start changing color, each and every capillary standing out against her pale skin in a stark shade of violet, almost like both of her feet are bruised. The change is startling. You can't help feeling worried when MacDonald just laughs at your reaction, seemingly unaffected by the fact that her feet are now shades of blue and purple. You'd certainly be able to empathize with the wide-eyed doctor who asks, "Do your feet always look like that?"

She's gotten used to their reactions. At this point, she even anticipates it.

She's been to countless doctors and heard countless diagnoses: CRPS, small fiber neuropathy, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, the list goes on and on. Not one diagnosis has been right.

MacDonald has had chronic pain for 16 months now, and doctors aren't any closer to figuring out the cause of the pain. Since the initial occurrence, MacDonald has also developed a hypersensitive spot on her shoulder, in addition to the four on her feet.

Seeing Hannah deal with the pain is "horrible, terrible, gut-wrenching, any bad word you can think of," MacDonald's mother Barbara said. "It's been very frustrating. We're still going through it and we still don't know what's going on."

### Laughing through the pain

MacDonald experiences constant pain, she's been forced give up swimming long events (her favorite), she babysits less and she's had to give up a trip to Europe, but she tries her best to stay positive.

She jokes about her condition often, referring to it as her "chronic disease." If you ask her what it's like dealing with chronic pain, she'll tell you it's annoying.

"It's a real *pain*," she'll say, unable to contain her laughter, amused by her own pun. Her laughter is contagious, and you'll find yourself smiling but unable to fathom the fact that both of you are amused by such an unfortunate situation.

"It was stressing me out a lot over the summer that this isn't an injury, it's a sickness," MacDonald said. "At first, I would get really discouraged when we would leave and a doctor would just say, 'I'm sorry but there's nothing I can do for you at this

point,' and send me to somebody else who would say the same thing. I'm used to it now. One day they'll figure it out."

Though she strives to stay optimistic on her own, MacDonald also has the support of her friends and family.

"She has a really positive attitude. She copes with it as well as someone who experiences pain 24 hours a day can," MacDonald's mother said. "I'm very very proud of her."

### Not alone

In addition to her parents, she's grateful for the help of her best friend, junior Megan Cabana.

"I walk around the room with her until her feet [return to their normal color]. I carry stuff for her. I open doors for her. I feel sympathetic for her and listen to doctors' phone calls with her," Cabana said. "I make her laugh because it takes her pain away temporarily."

Sometimes laughing doesn't always work, so MacDonald comes up with different ways to distract herself. There are days at swim practice when the pain is unbearable, when it feels as if knives are stuck in her heels and shoulder, but she keeps swimming. She does math problems or tries to remember what she wore to school last week.

Trying to calculate the number of seconds in a year "takes up all of [her] thought" and she stops thinking of the pain. The alternative option is getting out of the pool, but she loves swimming and she doesn't want to get kicked off the team.

### Hopeful for relief

Distraction doesn't always work either. Despite her efforts, every once in a while she feels upset and utterly hopeless. It usually happens when she's really tired and upset about things unrelated to her chronic pain, like school.

In the beginning, it would happen every time she came back from yet another unsuccessful doctor's appointment. She was in pain, and it seemed like no one was helping her.

During winter break, MacDonald and her mother will fly to Boston to see the doctors at Boston Children's Hospital.

"They have the top children's hospital in the country and the top diagnostic team for pediatric chronic pain, so they're going to try to diagnose me there," MacDonald said.

It's been a long 16 months full of doctors and incorrect diagnoses for MacDonald and her family, but they're "cautiously optimistic" about the chance of being correctly diagnosed in Boston.



Top: Juniors Hannah MacDonald and Megan Cabana laugh while playing a game during Elizabeth Funk's math class. Cabana frequently tries to make MacDonald laugh, to distract her from her chronic pain.

Bottom left: After fourth block, Cabana helps carry MacDonald's backpack as they walk to the parking lot. MacDonald often can't carry things on her shoulder because of her hypersensitivity.

Bottom right: MacDonald takes off her shoes to show how they turn blue when she stays still for more than a couple of minutes. (Photos by Dana Dinh)