For most of my life, I’ve hated sports. I’m not good at them and playing them has almost always been a miserable experience for me. In August of 2018, I started my freshman year of high school at Miriam Academy, which is a small, private high school in St. Louis, Missouri, for students with learning challenges such as autism and ADHD. I’d been diagnosed with Asperger’s back in 2016.

                About a month into the school year, Mr. Holmes, my English teacher told me he could see me playing on the school baseball team. I didn’t understand why and figured there’s no way I’d do it. On the last day of school before Thanksgiving break, I asked him about it during the school’s annual Friendsgiving lunch. I don’t remember exactly how our conversation went, but we ended up making a bet. I’d play on the baseball team that spring. If I didn’t like it, he’d get me something. If I did like it, I’d get him something. I agreed to this. We shook on it.

                As Mr. Holmes explained to me, this wasn’t a competitive baseball team at all. A lot of the players weren’t athletic at all. It was about trying new things, gaining confidence, having fun, and going outside your comfort zone. The team had never even won a game before, but that didn’t matter. Miriam Academy had just opened back in 2016, making it only the school’s third year in existence, so it’s not like there’d been a ton of baseball games to win anyway.

                Throughout the next few months, I thought about baseball nonstop. I jokingly whined to Mr. Holmes and others about having to play. Even though I joked about it, I was terrified. Part of why Mr. Holmes wanted me to play so much was because he wanted me to have a positive sports experience after all the negative ones I’d had. I didn’t see how that could happen. Apparently, no one had ever regretted playing on the team. It was a magical experience for most students. Still, I didn’t understand how it could possibly be this way for me.

                Eventually, baseball season started. Most of the school was playing so no one played every game and a lot of games got cancelled because of rain. It wasn’t until the end of April that I got to play my first game. On my birthday which was few weeks earlier, Mr. Holmes told me I was one of the bravest students he’d ever taught. I didn’t understand why at the time. Soon, however, I’d know.

                At my first game, I was crying in the dugout because I was so scared. The baseball field was ginormous. Mr. Holmes told me he wasn’t going to make me go out there. I did go out there. I was here and ready after months of mental preparation and lots of people were counting on me. I couldn’t let anyone down. Somehow, I made it to first base.

                That game went okay, but I didn’t understand where the magic was. One day, however, I was sitting outside drawing during art class when it hit me. Going out there had been super brave. Mr. Holmes was right. I was brave. I may have been afraid of a lot of things, but that’s not what bravery is about. Bravery is doing what you’re afraid to do. Realizing this was the magic I’d been meant to find. Through this experience, Mr. Holmes taught me a very important lesson that I’m always going to remember outside your comfort zone is where the magic happens.

                Throughout the rest of high school, I had many fun times, but also dealt with many challenges. At the start of my junior year, one of my best friends moved away and four of my teachers got new jobs. One of those teachers was Mr. Holmes. I was more devastated than I’d ever been in my life. He was the best teacher I’d ever had in my life, and I didn’t know how I’d survive without him. Somehow, I got through my last two years of high school despite my intense grief. I’d promised Mr. Holmes I’d play baseball every year. During my sophomore year, baseball didn’t happen because of the pandemic, but it did happen during junior and senior years. I hadn’t counted on doing it without Mr. Holmes but wasn’t going to break my promise. During both these years, I was one of the only girls and one of the only upperclassmen playing baseball. This didn’t stop me. My younger self would be amazed at the fact that I willingly played baseball with a bunch of younger boys, but I don’t regret it one bit.

                On May 13, 2022, I graduated from high school. Mr. Holmes attended my class’s graduation. We knew he was showing up, but when we saw him coming in the building, some of my classmates were banging on the window and waving at him while I cried happy tears. Everyone loved him. He’d even gotten the Missouri teacher of the year award back in 2015, which he totally deserved. I’d been staying connected with him through email, but I was so happy to see him again. I was also super excited to be finishing high school and starting college at Drury University. I was also terrified about whether I’d be able to handle college, but my experiences in high school made me believe maybe I could handle it.

                Now I’m a sophomore at Drury University. I’ve had to go outside my comfort zone many times and things have been far from easy, but I’ve gotten through it. It’s clear that my high school experiences have had a big impact on my college experience so far. In college, I’ve grown a lot in my Christian faith. I have no doubt that it was God that led me out onto the baseball field and gave me all my courage. It’s just like God to use unexpected methods to help people grow. He used sports which are something I hate to help me gain self-confidence and learn the importance of bravery.

                My story is a reminder that it’s the hard things in life that make us grow stronger. It’s the uncomfortable things that often have the best outcomes. As I allowed Mr. Holmes to challenge and teach me, we need to let God challenge and teach us even more. If we’re willing to step outside our comfort zones, we can serve God in much more powerful ways and lead others to Jesus. Bravery can also inspire others. Mr. Holmes has told me that I’ve impacted him as much as he’s impacted me. I don’t know about that, but it feels good to know that I’ve inspired him and others. He also said I’m one of his favorite humans. We still keep in touch through email which makes me super happy. This is something else God does which is amazing. When I found out Mr. Holmes was leaving, I was worried I’d never get to talk to him ever again and that he wouldn’t be in my life anymore. This is not what happened. I feel like we’re even closer now than we were when he was my teacher in high school.

Nothing can compare to the magic that occurred when Jesus went outside his comfort zone and died on the cross so that we could be saved. Still, we can and should go outside our comfort zones and grow stronger in the process. I’ve shared my story with others many times and never have and probably never will get tired of it. Going outside your comfort zone is hard, but we should all make sure to do it from time to time. It’s where the magic happens.