

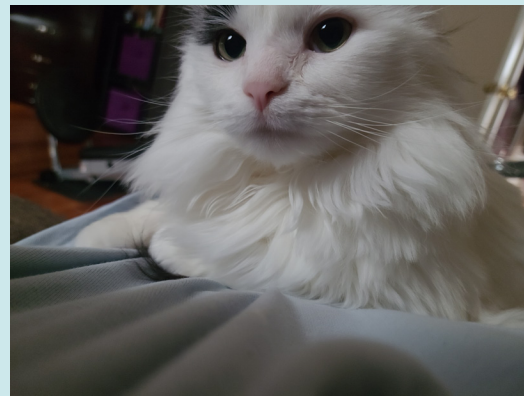
Patient Story

Featuring: Rachael Barta

By: Alexaundra Zywicki

Rachael Barta is a native of Connecticut where she currently resides, spending her free time baking, watching television and visiting her family whenever possible. She has a Bachelor of Science in Veterinary Pathology and Pathobiology from the University of Connecticut. At the start of the year, she began a new journey to continue her education pursuing a medical technician certification allowing her to work as a generalist in a laboratory. Her love and passion for animals was evident from the start of our conversation, with her cat Boopa at her side for the entirety of our video call. Aside from providing one other with mutual support and companionship, Rachael and Boopa have something else in common: they both have autoimmune conditions.

She first began to consider the idea that something could be wrong after developing unusual changes in her skin. Others began to ask if she had spent time traveling to a warmer climate because she appeared to be tan. Initially she wrote it off, but recalls being in Walmart and noticing spotty, bleached areas of skin in the mirror. Her skin symptoms progressed to include itching and irritation, which prompted a visit to a dermatologist. Subsequent blood work revealed that she in fact had Scleroderma, confirming her own suspicions that something was wrong. Her diagnosis came at the age of 24, four hours before her graduation ceremony for completing her associate degree. Despite the news, she attended her graduation with a huge smile on her face and the support of her mom and grandmother, a testament to her resilience and positive nature.



When asked about her mindset after receiving the news, Rachael explained the most challenging part of her journey. "When you are first diagnosed, you go online and go solely off of the information you find. You get depressed, feel hopeless and think 'am I going to be around in 10 years, who knows?'"

Rachael has found herself on the other side of this hurdle, as she has worked to embrace a more accepting attitude towards her condition. She finds herself dwelling less on the 'what ifs' that life has to offer and has adopted the notion that life is too short to worry about what she can't control. Initially she wondered if there were other people out there like her, which led her to seek out individuals with similar experiences that could not only listen but also relate. She discovered the Tri-State Chapter of the Scleroderma Foundation, which has played an integral role in providing guidance as she worked adjust her mindset. She credits her support group for providing an unwavering sense of community and for their continued understanding, helping her sort through her own personal struggles regarding her health.

As the Eastern CT Support Group Leader for the Tri-State Chapter, Rachael has been taking advantage of the opportunity to give back to the community that has undoubtedly impacted her life in a substantial way. Her group meets in Canterbury in a quiet corner of Connecticut, open to individuals of all ages with any type of autoimmune condition, not exclusively Scleroderma. Her biggest goal for her meetings is to make sure that the members are being helped in some way. Whether it be reassurance that they are not alone, providing a source of understanding or offering as much information as possible to promote healthy ways to navigate a new reality. Throughout the past year, Covid-19 has uprooted the structure of meetings requiring adaptability and a newfound dependence on technology. The meetings have become all virtual through Zoom, which has posed a challenge as it eliminates the close contact that members crave and rely on for support. Meetings have become more one-on-one sessions and Rachael is looking forward to the future when the group setting can be reestablished.

When asked to describe her experience with the Tri-State Chapter, Rachael began to choke up as she put into words the influence the community has had on her. "Every person with this is different, all with different symptoms but watching how determined others are has been inspiring. These individuals have overcome so much and I'm thankful to be part of it".

At the end of our conversation, Rachael left me with advice to keep in mind while pursuing a career in healthcare. She emphasized the importance of lending an ear, allowing an individual to explain their story without feeling like a bother or burden. The message she hopes people take away from her story is to know that you are not alone and to never feel like all is lost. Rachael's impact on those with autoimmune conditions has already been remarkable, filled with empathy, kindness and optimism that radiates to those whose lives she has touched and positively impacted. During our conversation one thing was evident and undeniable: her future is bright, and she is just getting started.

