

## Nicole Giron

*Cleft Palate Foundation's Story of the Month*

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<http://www.cleftline.org/features/som>

Picture day for anyone is nerve-wracking. The older you become, the more time and effort you invest into looking perfect. Why? Because this photo is how others will remember you for the rest of your life – or at least until the next yearbook comes out. The most “important” part of a picture, as everybody knows, is the smile. Many people practice their smiles nights beforehand, memorizing exactly how much each muscle needs to flex to achieve a flawless smile. As you step into the camera’s view, the photographer tells you how to stand, sit, tilt your head, cross your hands, and oh yeah – to smile.

“Miss, aren’t you going to smile for the camera? Say cheese!”

‘I’m sorry, but this is my smile,’ I always think to myself, ignoring the photographer until he or she gives up on me and finally takes the picture. I learned not to listen to photographers and just do my own thing when it came to my smile. My jaws just don’t close properly! I was tired of my pictures being taken in the middle of my saying “cheese” and receiving yet another picture with my mouth looking wide open. Since my smile is not yet “flawless,” I have learned to simply smile with my lips.



Nicole, 2009

Hi, my name is Nicole, I am 15 years old, and I was born with a unilateral cleft lip and palate. I was born a bouncing, healthy baby girl, and I am still as healthy as ever! My condition was a shock to my parents because they had no idea I would be born with it. During all of my ultrasounds, my hand was in my mouth, preventing



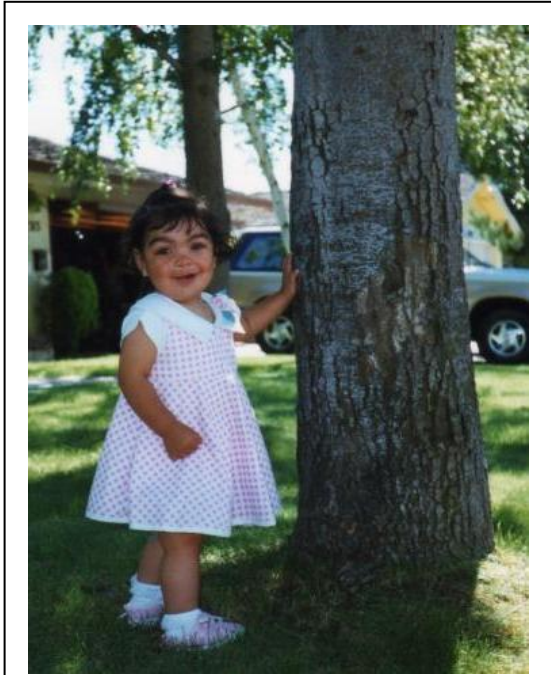
Nicole, before her first surgery

my doctors and parents from realizing that I was going to have a cleft lip and palate. Nevertheless, they were ecstatic when I arrived. My maternal aunt was also born with a unilateral cleft lip and palate, so luckily my mom knew a little about what to expect.

Throughout my life, my mom has always assured me that even though God may have taken away a little piece of me, he gave me a great wealth of intelligence in return. This aphorism of hers has

helped me through loads of sadness and insecurity I have experienced. As a toddler, I would stand in the mirror and look at my reflection all the time, mostly to figure out why I was so different. My mom has never lied to me in my quest for knowledge; when I asked about my scar, she explained to me that when I was in her womb, my face did not quite finish making itself. She then reassured me by introducing her aphorism.

Children are innocent, and with this innocence come insatiable curiosity and brutal honesty. I don't blame them; I was very curious about my appearance when I was little, too. But when eating a seed results in a tree



Nicole, after her lip and palate surgeries

growing in your belly and the sweater under the bed is still the boogeyman, others' curiosity can seem just as menacing as an internal tree or that mean old boogeyman sweater.

Now, when children ask me why I look different, I explain to them how I was born, which is usually good enough for them. As a little girl, though, when someone would stare, ask their parents loudly about me, or even ask me directly about my face, I wanted to run away and cry. School felt lonely, books were friends, and my parents were the blanket I would cover under when I was scared. Eventually, my parents pulled back that blanket and helped me learn how to become an understanding, confident person. They gave me the opportunity to do everything in order to develop my confidence - dance, karate, ice and roller skating, baking, art classes, and trips abroad. These experiences made me feel unstoppable.

Surgery was the one thing that had the ability to make me feel stoppable for a little bit - yes, that's right, not boys or years of braces, but surgery. I have had a total of five

surgeries so far, the first of which when I was two months old - and this does not count surgery on a broken pinky finger. Thankfully, I only have two more surgeries to go - a double jaw reconstruction in March, 2010, and one for "finishing touches" (plastic surgery on my nose and lip and scar removal) sometime in the future. Surgeries have not permitted me to visit family in foreign countries during summer, have made me stop activities for a while, and most recently, will not let me join my high school swim team this school year. I hear that the jaw reconstruction surgery is the most painful one. I'm not too happy about it, mostly because it won't let me swim this year, I'll have to take some time off of school for recovery, and I won't be able to eat foods I love for a while. But with most surgeries, I believe the end justifies the means.

One thing surgery has given me, aside from further confidence in my appearance, has been inspiration. My many appointments and hospital stays have enlightened me and helped me to discover my passion: medicine. The doctors, nurses, and staff that I have met have all been amazing, and I aspire to be just like them. Anything and everything about medicine fascinates me. Currently, I am working with the athletic trainer at school and learning about sports medicine. Discovering the different kinds of injuries associated with sports and how to help them heal is riveting. Even though I'm still unsure of what type of doctor I want to be, my cleft lip and palate has given me motivation to help others like me.

The future is a curious thing, but then again, so is everything else. All I know is that I am happy, healthy, and looking forward to finally smiling with my pearly whites in my next yearbook picture.