

FROM LOSS TO LIFE CALLING: HOW ONLINE COMMUNITIES HELPED SHAPE ONE SURVIVOR'S HEALING JOURNEY



“The last thing I remember was being pulled through the back window of the car and screaming for my friend...then I collapsed. When I woke up, three months had passed.”

Sarah Italien holds close the carefree memories leading up to that gaping void. She and her good friend Juanita, both students at Albany State University, had spent the evening celebrating another friend's birthday. They were fun-loving college students full of hopes, dreams, and big plans for the future. Their whole lives were before them.

Everything changed in the early hours of March 23, 2022. As the girls headed back to their dorm, Juanita pulled up to a stop sign and waited to turn right. Without warning, a drunk driver slammed into the back of their vehicle at a high rate of speed. Their gas tank exploded.

Trapped in the burning wreckage, Sarah clung to life as her friend tragically lost hers.

Sarah was pulled to safety by first responders, but not before she had been burned over 49% of her body. After collapsing at the scene, she never regained consciousness before being placed in a medically induced coma at the hospital.

She was alive, but her fight for survival was only beginning.

During the three-month gap in her memory, Sarah survived severe infections and endured multiple surgeries, including partial amputation of all ten fingers. When doctors were finally able to safely bring her out of the coma, she awoke to a shocking and confusing reality. It was a stark contrast to the life she remembered before that tragic ride home.

At 18 years old, Sarah had to start over. After being released from the ICU, she spent months in the burn center rehabilitation unit relearning the most basic life skills—walking, talking, eating, self-care. Regaining the ability to perform the fundamental tasks of daily living was a struggle. Learning to function independently without full use of her hands was complicated. Slowly but steadily, she learned, practiced, and adapted.

Functional milestones were only part of her path to recovery. The fire on that fateful night posed a threat beyond her physical state; it also kindled a fierce struggle within her mind and spirit. In an instant, Sarah had lost her friend, her health, her fingers, normalcy, and even time itself. When she finally was able to go home in August 2022, her life looked very different. Finding a new normal and building a life outside the hospital would be challenging and, at times, overwhelming.

Sarah had always been known for her positive, encouraging nature, and her optimism buoyed her through many times. But the tragedies she endured would test the limits of her physical and emotional endurance. Trying to piece her life back together while coping with the loss of her friend, the pain of her injuries, the scars of her burns, and the trauma of the whole ordeal—it was complex and uncertain. Navigating the stares and the questions of others was complicated.

Follow Sarah's journey by connecting with her on TikTok and Instagram [@BURNDIARIES22](#).

As time went on, an unfamiliar feeling of isolation began creeping into her soul. When the pain, fear, and frustrations of recovery weighed her down, she began to realize it would take more than inner strength to keep her going. Her family was her rock, but even surrounded by loved ones and supportive friends, she still had a strange sense of feeling alone.



During a visit to the wound clinic, Sarah learned of a support group at her burn center. That group connected her with Phoenix Society. When she started exploring Phoenix Society's website, she discovered a virtual community where burn survivors from around the globe and from all walks of life shared their challenges and triumphs. She found a safe place for connection, where practical tips on self-care merged seamlessly with emotional support—a space where she truly belonged.

"I jumped right into the Phoenix Society Facebook survivor group and virtual support meetings. And it felt so good," Sarah said. "Like a weight off my heart."

Explore all of our virtual connection opportunities to find hope, healing, and fellowship on your terms at www.phoenix-society.org/virtual-support.

Sarah quickly became a regular in Phoenix Society's Virtual Support Groups. She felt at home among kindred spirits who understood the depths of her struggle the way only other survivors could. The Facebook group became a haven of encouragement and support, where she could connect any time of day or night.

The digital community she found through Phoenix Society's virtual programming was transformational for Sarah. The relationships she made with other burn survivors breathed new life into her journey.

"It's reassuring to know I'm not the only one grappling with something this tough. We all have our unique experiences, but we can relate and help and support each other. That's so powerful."

The collective wisdom of those walking a similar path gave Sarah confidence in her journey and a renewed sense of direction in her life. As the first anniversary of her homecoming approaches, she continues to regain her independence and is making plans to return to college to continue studying psychology—a longstanding passion that has only grown through all that she has been through.

"I believe everything happens for a reason," Sarah said. "I have always been interested in psychology, but my burn injury and the healing process have deepened my love for how I can develop that interest to help others. It's like it's all just falling into place. My own story is going to open new doors for me to help others, so they won't feel alone."

Having personally experienced the transformational impact of peer support, she envisions herself in a career where she can be a source of strength, support, and guidance for those who have lived through trauma. She's on a mission to help others navigate their own roads to healing. In the process, she's reclaiming her life and redeeming her losses to reflect hope to others.

Sarah stands as a living testament to the resiliency of the human spirit. Her continuing journey underscores the importance of community in healing. Her story is a call to action for each of us to recognize and respond to the critical role we play in supporting each other on the path to recovery and renewal. ■

How You Can Help

No survivor should have to face the isolating, bleak journey of recovery without the connection found among peers and in support groups. The need for support remains a constant. And Sarah's life appeals to us to find our own place as peer supporters, volunteers, and donors—to do our part to foster a world where no walks the path of recovery alone.

- Make a difference with a donation by visiting www.phoenix-society.org/donate. Your gift will support life-changing programs like Virtual Support Group.
- Offer your support and guidance to others by volunteering with the Phoenix SOAR program. Learn more by emailing info@phoenix-society.org.
- Share your truth and help others find healing through stories by submitting your story to our Virtual Open Mic. Share today at www.phoenix-society.org/open-mic.