

A photograph of a woman with long blonde hair, wearing a dark t-shirt and jeans, sitting in a field of red tulips. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. Her right leg is a prosthetic, and she is holding it with both hands. The background shows more tulips and some trees under a bright sky.

Ambition Never Faultered

Walking, running and getting dressed are simple everyday tasks that not many people think twice about accomplishing. Now, try to imagine loading cattle into trailers, working pens, chutes and weight scales, or balancing yourself on a horse while barrel racing. These tasks would be challenging for any person to complete. But can you picture doing any of these tasks without one of your legs?

Melissa Tabke, a graduate student at Texas Tech University, continues living her life one step at a time- with just two very different legs.

Trophies, plaques and ribbons line the walls of Tabke's childhood bedroom, as proud mementos of her participation in basketball, band concerts, dance competitions, and her 4-H horse project.

While Tabke was an active, typical high-school student, things would soon change and she would develop an entirely new perception of the "simple" things in life. As shown by her many achievements, Melissa has always been active.

On June 16, 2010, while on a walk with a close friend Tabke would encounter an accident. As the pair walked back towards the house with the sun setting on them, a motorcycle came over the top and barreled into Tabke.

"The accident happened so fast I wasn't even sure what was going on," said Sawyer Heidesch, Tabke's friend. "We were just talking- then she wasn't there anymore."

Tabke was thrown 60 feet into the air and tumbled another 20 feet before stopping in the bottom of the ditch.

Blinded by the setting sun, the motorcyclist was unable to react quickly enough to avoid the crashing into Tabke. With her life hanging in the balance, Tabke was rushed to a hospital 15 miles from the accident, and immediately care-flighted to a larger facility. Upon arrival, Tabke underwent three surgeries designed to save as much limb as possible. However, after unsuccessfully battling a devastating infection for days, doctors were forced to amputate Tabke's leg directly above the knee.

"Melissa Tabke seems to be simply walking through life," said Catherine Friesen, Tabke's mother, voice cracking, "but you have to take a step back to see all of who Melissa truly is."

Catherine continued to tell stories of her oldest daughter, Melissa, until she paused, took a deep breath and recalled one final sentence her daughter told her before her last surgery to amputate the rest of her lower leg, "Just do it so I can get back to my life."

Upon spending 24 days hospitalized, Tabke was released on the condition she would attend daily physical therapy. Tabke, who had graduated high school only 15 days prior to her accident, left the hospital with intentions to prepare to leave home for college, and not necessarily going to physical therapy.

Four weeks after losing a major limb, Tabke traveled the 947 mile trip from Marcus, Iowa to Lubbock, Texas to begin her freshman year at Texas Tech University.

"I never questioned my plans for a moment," said Tabke. The second I left the hospital, my mind was on Lubbock."

From the moment Tabke stepped foot on the Tech campus, she did not hesitate to get involved. Tabke said she participated in the wool judging class as a freshman, served as a member of the horse judging team, Block and Bridle and Collegiate 4-H. Taking the step to get involved allowed Tabke to take her mind off the accident and to meet new friends, travel and learn about different industries in agriculture.

"Getting involved was something I had planned to do when I first decided to attend Tech, and that was before my accident," Tabke said.

In all her hard work, Tabke was able to achieve her bachelor's degree in only three years. As an undergraduate, Tabke assisted in research for Sara Trojan, Ph.D., collecting fecal samples to enhance Trojan's data.

To further challenge herself, Tabke took extra courses, such as a certification course for artificial insemination. Tabke said the extra courses were not to just supplement her resume, but expand her knowledge on various aspects of the cattle industry, which she has been passionate about since she was a young child.

"Melissa is very determined, she has overcome a lot of adversity," Trojan said. "She is very strong-willed and persistent in terms of going after what she wants to achieve. I admire her for that."

After overcoming such adversity, Tabke was inspired to commit her service to aid in the development of third-world countries.

During the summer of 2013, Tabke said she traveled to Panama and worked for the Kālu Yala Entrepreneurial Internship and Study Abroad, focusing on agricultural advancement in the country. During her time in Panama, Tabke

worked every day completing different tasks, including digging ponds, building chicken coops and goat pens, planting more than 300 trees, and building terraces and gardens. Tabke spent time learning about new plants and their purpose to the

success of the region, and touring numerous farms that focused on poultry and swine production in rural areas.

Participating in an internship of this level requires not only a high degree of education

but you must be able to endure many physical challenges. Tabke said she knew the challenges and wasn't going to allow her "accident" to hold her back from learning and traveling the world to see beautiful places such as the Panamanian jungles.

"I learned a lot about developing regions while in Panama," Tabke said. "I know I will be able to use the skills I learned in my future, which I hope will be increasing agriculture production in developing countries."

After graduating with her bachelor's degree, Tabke chose to stay at Texas Tech and further her education by pursuing a master's degree in ruminant nutrition.

As a graduate student, Tabke said she spends many hours in the lab and at the Texas Tech University Research Farm collecting and testing data for various projects. Tabke also began her own research project, which is focused on improving growth performance and carcass quality through feeding additives to beef cattle.

Tabke's friend, Heidesch who was beside her on that fateful day, said he believes Tabke's ambition has never faltered, even since the moment she was hit.

"Melissa is going to become the woman she wants to be regardless of any circumstances. That is by her choice, to accept things out of our control and do what she has to, to reach and exceed her goals." **T**

*"Melissa is going to become
the woman she wants to be
regardless of any circumstances."*

Trevor King
WINNSBORO, TEXAS

