

Testimony

Jessica Long Tells Her Story

Paralympic Swimmer Jessica Long Finds Her Identity in Christ



Jessica Long, a 13-time Paralympic Gold Medalist swimmer, recently shared a behind-the-scenes look into her preparation for the 2021 Paralympic games in Tokyo.

“What people see is the results and the success, but not the behind-the-scenes and what we’re all going through,” the 29-year-old told PEOPLE. “Like moving away from family, moving away from my husband, living out here training five to six, seven hours a day.”

“It is all worth it,” she said. “But I’m definitely at a point where I’m so excited for that reunion and when I get to go back home.”

Long looks forward to competing in her first Tokyo event on Aug. 27.

Despite Long’s intense focus on swimming, Long said that her identity is in Christ. The Paralympian confessed that for much of her career, swimming became her identity. “It’s taken me a long time to really work on this,” she said. “I love swimming, but swimming can’t be my entire identity, my entire world.”

Long, who was adopted from Russia with a rare condition that forced American doctors to amputate both of her legs, said that there was a point where she wanted nothing to do with God. “I can’t think of a single childhood memory that you know we weren’t always at church or with our church community and what I heard a lot of is that God made me this way and God always had a plan for me and God loves me and I didn’t like it,” Long said in a 2020 interview with I Am Second. “I knew I didn’t like it. I knew I didn’t want anything to do with this God that made me this way.”

Although Long endured the initial surgery, she had to get over 20 additional surgeries to cut back the bone as she grew older.

“To top it all off, I was born on leap year so all of my life the calendar would skip me every four years before I had an actual birthday and I think in my head as a little girl that just solidified how I felt about myself, that I was non-existent,” she said.

But then Long found swimming. However, even after becoming the youngest Paralympian Gold-medalist swimmer at 12, she felt empty inside. “I found sports and I found that I was really good at sports, I found that I excelled in swimming and when I first joined to swim team I was 10 years old and I was the only disabled swimmer on the team,” she said. “I kept going back because honestly, I just liked beating these girls with legs and it started to fulfill something in me, just earning love.”

“I wanted to be perfect in everything that I did,” she continued. “There was one year I had 18 world record-breaking performances and I didn’t slow down ... my worth was in swimming, my identity was swimming. But at the same time, I was just broken.”

Long said that at the time, she developed an eating disorder and started to drift away from her relationships. However, while at a Bible study, Long dedicated her life to Christ, and her perspective completely changed.

“I was at my Friday night youth group Bible study and I’m sitting there and I just think I just couldn’t do it alone anymore,” she recalled. “I just got up and I made the walk to the front and I found this woman and I just said you know I want to give God my whole heart for once.”

“I prayed with her and as soon as I prayed it was the first time in my entire life that I felt enough and then I was actually a part of God’s family for once.” Long said that while life’s circumstances did not get easier, she found that God provided for her in her moments of struggle.

Soon after her experience at youth group, Long had the opportunity to visit her birth parents in Russia. Long said that she felt like God had prepared her, so she and her sister, Hannah, set out on the journey to Russia. “I felt really scared,” Long said. “I took my sister’s hand and we walked together on this snowy icy sidewalk and you could hear my birth mom, Natalia, and my birth father were just crying.”

“Something she just kept saying was that she couldn’t forgive herself for giving me up for adoption, and I think if I had not accepted Christ as my Savior, I don’t think I would have forgiven her either,” she added. “But in that moment I realized that you know God has forgiven me, my whole life, and I did, I forgave my mom ... I realized God really had had a plan this entire time.”

Long said that while she still experiences pain due to her disability, she uses it as a reminder of God’s love and forgiveness. “Since accepting Christ as my Savior, I don’t have to just go to God and have it all together,” she said. “He knows that I don’t have it all together and I think it’s something I still fight, that feeling of being in control and I am constantly reminded every day that I need to give it to God.”

“Every day, when I put on these two prosthetic legs that are heavy and they still hurt my legs, still cause me pain and I think it’s honestly this really cool beautiful reminder that I can’t do it on my own, as determined as I am, I just can’t.”

. *Gleaned from Movieguide - 2021 08 26*