

A Curvy Girl's Journey

Gemma Champion, 20, is one of many Australians affected by scoliosis. The severe curve in her spine caused her excruciating back pain that required surgery, and since her recovery Gemma has dedicated herself to making sure other girls like her know they aren't alone.

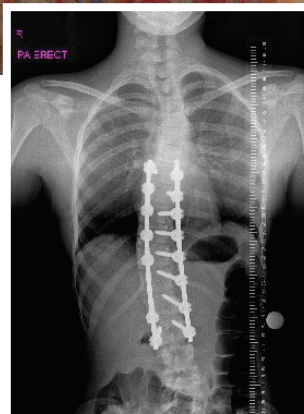
BY VANESSA SAFAJOU

At 16, Gemma went to the doctor with a simple flu, but when her doctor asked her to lift the back of her shirt, she was immediately diagnosed with scoliosis, which is an abnormal curvature of the spine. When a scoliosis develops the spine bends sideways and rotates along its vertical axis. These changes have cosmetic and physiological effects with long-term consequences, which may result in significant health problems with severe curves, according to Scoliosis Australia. The curve in Gemma's spine was 64 degrees and caused her a lot of pain, often leaving her in tears from the pain of carrying her backpack.

A few months after her diagnosis, Gemma underwent surgery to correct the curve in her spine, and it was during her recovery in hospital where Gemma finally met someone who knew exactly what she was going through — the girl sharing her hospital room was there for the same procedure. "Before I had surgery I wasn't able to talk to anyone who has scoliosis and I felt so alone," says Gemma. "I had a good support network but I didn't really have anyone that truly understood what I was going through. We got along really well and supported each other in hospital, and after leaving hospital we continued to keep in contact and support each other," she says.

In her research, Gemma came across the scoliosis group, Curvy Girls. Curvy Girls is a network of peer-led support groups, and their mission is to reduce the emotional impact of scoliosis by empowering girls through mutual support and acceptance. "I thought that it was cool but didn't really know how I could be part of it," she says. "I spoke to my parents and close friends and they encouraged me to contact Curvy Girls in New York and see if I could start a group in Sydney." And that's exactly what she did. Curvy Girls Sydney had its first meeting in March this year with just one girl, but that number has since grown to eight girls, including one who joins via Skype from Singapore, and Gemma couldn't be more thrilled to be helping these girls through their scoliosis journeys. "I know how it feels to be alone and not have anyone to talk to about scoliosis, and I also know what it's like to feel supported while having scoliosis," she says. "The support I received through my friend was so helpful and I wanted to give other girls the opportunity to be supported just like I was."

Gemma says her experience with scoliosis and Curvy Girls has helped her learn so much about herself and has given her more confidence. "I've learned that not everyone will understand what you're going



through, and that's okay. You need to find and talk to those people who do understand," she says. Earlier this year, Gemma attended the International Curvy Girls Conference in New York with 90 other girls at all different stages in their scoliosis journeys, and she is working hard to raise funds to return in 2018 with her Sydney group members.

Curvy Girls has introduced Gemma and hundreds of girls just like her to a global network of support and understanding, and she hopes to help this network grow and continue to help make living with scoliosis a little bit easier for young girls.

TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT CURVY GIRLS AND THE WORK THEY DO, VISIT CURVYGIRLSSCOLIOSIS.COM OR CONTACT GEMMA DIRECTLY AT SYDNEY@CURVYGIRLS.SCOLIOSIS.COM.