

Nikki Burdine anchors the noon and 5pm news on WHAG-TV in Hagerstown, Maryland. She received her BA in Journalism and Electronic Media from the University of Tennessee where she was the president of the campus-run TV station. She describes herself as a “Southern Belle.”

What do you like most about your work?

I think I have the best job in the world. Every single day is something new and I learn something new. I'm able to learn and become a better person by meeting people throughout the community. I feel blessed.

Do you think that TS has had an impact on your career?

No, I don't think it had an impact. In the beginning I would have said 'yes,' and at college it did, but not now. When I'm working I'm in 'the zone.' A lot of people with TS say that about performing. When I'm anchoring the news, I don't think about it. All the bad stuff falls to the wayside.

I have had to overcome more obstacles and that makes me appreciate my job more. There's an impact, but not in a bad way.

When were you diagnosed?

Around the age of 11, originally the diagnosis was OCD. The medication wasn't working and things got aggressive with violent tics. My mother, bless her, is a special education teacher. She did some research and determined it was more than OCD, more because of the tics that I couldn't control. She took me to Duke for testing.

Does anyone else in your family have TS, or a related disorder?

No, no one in the family has TS, but maybe my grandma had OCD.

What were your school years like?

I was very blessed. I was never bullied. Middle school was rough — just coming to terms with the diagnosis was tough. Once I was in high school the difficult part for me was writing, erasing and writing again when doing my homework.

I was never good in math and a math teacher kind of bullied me. He thought my father was doing my homework for me. My father saw how difficult it was for me — writing and erasing and writing — and he'd take what I did and then copy it. My father had to explain it to the teacher who thought we were making TS up. He thought I was cheating and my dad was helping me cheat!

My friends were good. I had these tics that scrunched up my face and puckered my lips. There are pictures of me with all my girlfriends all making that same face. They knew me as quirky

Nikki. I had the support of my family and friends and a small town of accepting people.

My freshman year at college was bad. I had everything under control at home. I had tics, but they were manageable and I wasn't depressed. But the change of scenery, not living with my parents, being in college — my tics got bad and I became severely depressed. I'm normally a bubbly, happy person. I couldn't get out of bed. They were afraid I'd commit suicide so they put me on pills for depression. At one point I was taking 19 pills a day! I didn't want to kill myself, but I didn't want to be a zombie, either. I gained 30 pounds in one month.

My mother said, 'This is not my daughter.' It wasn't healthy. Everyone wanted me to drop out and move home and go to a community college. But quitting wasn't an option for me. I didn't listen. We switched doctors and figured out a medication that had the least side effects, we weaned me down to one medication.

I still have tics, but with aging and maturing, I've learned to cope with TS.

What do you do to cope with the stress involved in your kind of work?

I don't really have a technique. If I feel tics getting bad, I go to a bathroom and let 'em loose. When I'm in the zone the tics just go away — the stress fuels me at work. I thrive on the air. I've gotten an urge to do a tic during commercial break, so I do a muted version, a little grunt.

I am not 'cured.' I have certain times when I just let 'em go! Mornings in the house are a good time to get them out of my system. It's my safety valve. And when I go home you better believe I let go. My cat doesn't care. Home is a place where I can let it all out. This became a way to train my brain: home yes and work no.

As a media insider, what do you think of the way TS is portrayed in movies, TV, etc.?

I don't have a problem with movies with the funny guy having TS. I don't get offended. It's still awareness. I consider TS something that makes me unique. Nine years ago, I wouldn't have said this, but funny or silly opens up the possibility of people watching to ask about TS. Even though some people can get offended, I poke fun at myself. When my co-workers make fun of TS, they know I don't take it too seriously. I've had



to overcome all this, why not laugh at it? It's what makes me special.

You are already a role model for many of the girls who attended the TSA national conference. Do you have any advice for girls with TS?

A positive attitude is the best thing a girl can have. If you are positive and able to smile, that will get you a long way. Think negatively and everything is going to be gloomy and sad. Find the sunny side. I truly believe that it has helped me get through the hard years. Surround yourself with positive people. If you have a friend who is kind of a jerk, get rid of him. Supportive parents and friends, good solid people — that's it but it's easier said than done.

Do you have any advice for parents of children with TS?

When I was first diagnosed my parents wanted to talk to me about TS, but I didn't want to talk about it. They were hurt by me not wanting to talk about TS and how I felt, so I'd say to parents don't nag and don't take it personally when your kids don't want to talk about TS.

Ask, 'How was your day?' Don't ask, 'Why are you ticcing?' or 'How were your tics today?'

Don't force them to talk when they aren't ready. Just make sure you are there for them and make sure their friends are good people. Teens talk to friends not parents, so make sure their friends understand TS.

Make sure the teachers know about it, too. That 8th grade math teacher... he finally got it after we explained it. Communication can solve so many things. The more we address things, the more we take care of them. You can't go wrong by talking. □