

Faith-Fueled Paralympian Encourages Others, 'Never, Ever Give Up'

Thirteen-time Paralympian Jessica Long was born with a defect that led to the need to amputate both her legs just above the knee. Her story of faith, hope and perseverance was recently featured in a Toyota Super Bowl ad.

That story starts long before her rise to fame in the prime-time commercial space, which she says came as a complete surprise.

Yet she wants it to be an encouragement to those in similar situations. "My biggest hope is that young people see me, a girl without legs in the Paralympics, on TV, and think, *I can do that too*," Long says.

Long was born with fibular hemimelia, a rare condition where the fibulas, ankles, heels and most of the bones in her feet are missing. Unable to care for her, her birth parents left her at an orphanage in Russia until Steven and Beth Long adopted her and her brother by adoption, Joshua, from the same orphanage.

The homeschooled athlete, now 28, credits her success to her parents' selflessness: "When my parents adopted me, they went into it completely full of faith and full of love, and I think that's something that really comes through in this commercial."

Though Long's faith was tested at times with the weight of her disabilities, the Lord drew close to her, and she realized she had to make her faith personal. She says giving her life to Christ was, "the best decision" she's ever made, and she's "learning to trust God."

In addition to winning 23 Paralympian gold medals, Long also has an affiliation with the advocacy group "Fight for the Fatherless," through which Christian athletes aim to encourage orphans and those affected by a disability.

"I got through every single challenging moment of my life because of my determination that God gave me," she says. To those who she advocates for through Fight for the Fatherless, and anyone following her story, Long says: "I want you to embrace who God made you to be. To love every part of yourself, flaws and all."