

Inspirational stories never cease to amaze me! The challenges that are faced, the obstacles that are endured and overcome, and the transformations to a person's life and the lives of those around them extends far beyond that than anyone might imagine. It is with admiration that Liquid Sun Rayz shares the stories of five people that have faced a turning point and yet they chose to believe; believe they could beat the odds, believed they were worth it, and believe in helping others. As you read about the journeys of each person, knowing that living a lifestyle dedicated to being strong and healthy played such an important role in their success, will hopefully motivate you in your own journey.

## JEFF BLACK

**B**orn with the brittle bone disease known as Osteogenesis-Imperfecta, Jeff Black has defied the odds and believed in himself to accomplish the impossible. As a fitness coach both online and at Iron House Strength and Conditioning, he believes that you can be your own hero.

Jeff Black was born with Osteogenesis-Imperfecta (OI), aka "the brittle bone disease", a very rare genetic disorder described by bones that break easily, often from little or no apparent cause. The disease affects roughly 25,000 people in the U.S. Depending on the severity of the disease, those afflicted may have just a few or as many as several hundred fractures in a lifetime. Both Jeff and his youngest son are diagnosed with type IV of the disease. To look at them you would not know they have it.

"Growing up, I was fortunate to have parents that allowed me to do everything, except contact sports which was good because I loved baseball. But being an eight year old kid, I took a double dog dare to go downhill on a skateboard. That June day in Knoxville, TN was hot and the street had just been re-tarred. The only thing I remember was how hot the pavement was because I laid there for a long time, and then they poured ice on me. Multiple surgeries later I was told I would never walk again." From the moment the physical therapist handed him a weight to help make his upper body stronger to better utilize his wheelchair and crutches, he was hooked and knew his life would never be the same and his journey



into health and fitness began. Although he was young, Jeff knew that if he gave his all, he could accomplish anything. Walking, without any aids, would be his first goal and accomplishment. Along the way, he endured both mental challenges and teasing from peers that didn't understand this rare disease. Inspired by the legs of Paul DeMayo on the cover of a magazine he saw in a grocery store, Jeff has continued to defy the odds by competing in bodybuilding since 2006. Jeff does not compete in the disabled category but rather he stands alongside the abled bodied men in the open category. Highlights include competing in last years' NPC National Championships and a 2nd place finish in Men's Open Lightweight Bodybuilding at the 2017 NPC Junior Nationals in

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Chicago. Each year, he steadily improves his physique and conditioning, pushing the boundaries of what is known about OI further.

"Bodybuilding has taught me a lot about myself. It's given me a life that people didn't believe could happen. It's put me in the position of being a role model to kids who write me telling me how much I inspire them and parents who are relieved to see that someone with OI can live a good life when they once felt their child would have to live in a bubble. Even my son is seeing the connection between our disease and the positive effects bodybuilding has had. I've come a long way from not being able to walk to squatting over 300 pounds. Ultimately, I hope to one day earn a pro card because I believe, through the sport of bodybuilding, I could help bring awareness to Osteogenesis-Imperfecta."

"Over the years I have both participated and put on a number of fundraisers. We started with a small fundraiser in 2014; a boot camp where people of all ages and fitness levels came to celebrate their health and strong bones. The event had a special guest, two year old Ryker who was born with a rare and severe recessive form of OI listed as Type 8. There are only 5 recorded type 8's in the country! Can you imagine having a disease so severe that bouncing a balloon on a string or even a sneeze could break your bones?! In 2017, we created an Angel Tree fundraiser and raised over \$2,100. And most recently, we raised over \$10,000 for a boy with OI who was in need of a wheelchair. We brought awareness to his story in a YouTube video and held a fundraiser at our gym. The community really came out for the cause, and now that boy can get what he needs. New drugs are showing potential in helping those with OI but being a rare disease there is a great need for more money for research. My goal is to create a documentary that showcases the incredible stories of others with Osteogenesis-Imperfecta. While there are so many things these young people

will never experience, what makes their story so amazing is their attitudes are so brilliantly positive. Long term I hope to start a foundation to raise more money and awareness."

In 2015, Iron House Strength and Conditioning was created with his former business partner and himself. The goal was to create a facility where all are welcomed and encouraged. A true fitness facility where everyone who enters is encouraged to be your own hero. Jeff believes that health and fitness are the most important things people should strive to control in order to live fulfilling lives. Empower yourself and become unapologetically you. Everyone has a desire to be the best they can be. There is nothing more satisfying than helping someone finally believe in themselves again.

"I am blessed to be able to do what I love and be successful. While I know my clients hire me because they know I can help them, they often tell me they can't look at me and quit even when they really want to. I help them get up the next day and keep putting one foot in front of the other. Perseverance is definitely a necessary attribute but my biggest take away from living with this disease is learning to live life free and take ownership of yourself. With these invaluable tools, I have a choice to be a victim or victor."

