

Who Am I To Stop It: Dani's Story

[distorted lyrical music]

[singing church hymn]

PASTOR: How many of you believe God answers prayer?

[claps, cheers]

How many of you really believe?

ALL: Amen!

Because if we really believe....

DANI: If I could ask any freakin' question, it would probably be, "Why me?"

PASTOR: I'm not talking about cars, money, riches, wealth. I'm talking about asking for what we need. Father, in the name of Jesus, you've seen every hand raised that said hey, I've got a need. I've got a need. And in the name of Jesus....

DANI: I've been asking that question for the past five years, and no one can answer it.

PASTOR: I'm just gonna pray. Just gonna pray. Dear Heavenly Father, I thank you.... Lord, sometimes this life throws out things to us that we don't even know how to explain. Sometimes we mess up; we create our own messes. Father, forgive us.

DANI: It was me because I smoked weed. It was me because I've had sex when I wasn't married. It was me because I had bad friends. It was me because I didn't go to church enough? I don't know.

People said "Dani, just get your GED. Just get your GED." And I was going to. But it was hard. And then people said, "Get your diploma." People said I couldn't, I wouldn't make it. That's what fucking thrived me to do better, you know? I did get expelled from a few schools. But...shit happens.

CASSANDRA: Ok, what are you doing? Have you planned your future out, Danielle?

DANI: No, I have not planned my future out.

CASSANDRA: OK, let me just go ahead. I wanna get these back here. There we go.

DANI: Does this go on the left or the right?

CASSANDRA: Wow! [everyone claps] This is so cool. This is like yay!

DANI: [giggles] All right.

CASSANDRA: Say cheese. Dani!

DANI: OK [giggles].

CASSANDRA: I will not take any of those pictures.

DANI: Not to do! I'm gonna do that when I get my diploma.

DEBBIE: Smile. Let's see those pretty whites. There we go.

[cacophony of voices]

DANI: Want me to start break dancing?

I don't know that person. [giggles]

[crowd cheers]

[graduation music: "Pomp and Circumstance"]

[enthusiastic cheers, applause]

PRINCIPAL: Graduates, Class of 2013 graduation ceremony. This class came together to experience triumph in the face of adversity. One student, Dani Sanderson, is walking with you tonight after coming back from a horrific car accident in October, 2007. She's a 7th year senior. Dani, would you please stand? Let's recognize you.

[cheers, applause]

DANI: Do I sit now? Do I sit?

CLASSMATE: Just wait.

[applause continues, somber music starts]

DANI: I was feeling pathetic and shit, so I wrote this.

Head held high to the sky

No lie but

Walk tall, can't fall

Still 5 foot 3

Although 2 foot 3

when I'm kneeling on the floor.

Asking Hey, God, hey, what's more?

Crying to yells at my head What's next to be said

Steady, contemplating, thinking

Why me? Why me?

As if I'm happy

Although, what you see

It's fake, all fake

With this crooked smile I tend to give

I dream I was more active in sports and the friends and plus the way that I live

To give me strength in life to get off this floor

What's next, what's real?

Not you, though, although I feel

I feel hopeless no thrive for the future, one

I feel as weak Let's talk about failure, two

I failed dreams I wish I was much more active in adventure, three

Negative condescending meaning such lies

It gets better Although, what's true?

Cuz do you know what I've been f'ing to do?

Sleeping around with random people

Smoke out of an apple or two

Been lied, betrayed, left by a few

Nobody's left but who do I look up to?

Which life? Should I want that?

For high school with kids who taunt

Or a brother who reminds me he's better, that he flaunts

One thing, one person, one friend to need

One wish I feel, but only how to proceed

[applause]

SPEAKER: Class of 2013, this is the moment we have all waited so long for! Congratulations!
We are now officially the 2013 graduated class of Olympia High School!

[massive cheers, live band plays]

CATHERINE: Dani!!!!!! I love you.

DANI: I love you too, Mom.

CATHERINE: I love you.

DANI: I love you too, word!

DANI: Is my hat all fucked up?

ATHENA: It's been 7 fucking years. 7. 7 years.

DANI: I was in high school for 7 years. 7 years for what?

ATHENA: For this moment!

[orchestral music rises, then fades dramatically]

DANI: Listening to Nicki now.

[bus beeps]

[bright, rhythmic music]

OK, well my nickname is Street ANGEL cuz I'm always on the freakin' street, like not like I don't live there, but I'm always downtown hanging out, smoking weed or just having coffee, smoking cigarettes. If I see someone down, I'll be like, "Hey, you're beautiful. Can I give you a hug?" It's good. I don't know. I don't know if I should be ashamed of it, but I feel like I fit in when I'm high cuz everyone's talking to me, listening to me.

[distorted lyrical music]

DANI: Here. Wanna put it on?

Ever since the car accident happened, dreams are irrelevant. Cuz like I had dreams of playing basketball and... doing things I can't do now. And I don't dream anymore.

Guess who called me last night?

SAM: Nicki Minaj?

DANI: Nicki Minaj. She did.

SAM: Hi, pumpkin.

DANI: Who're you talking to?

SAM: My pumpkin.

DANI: Your pumpkin? Did you say hi to your pumpkin? Your pumpkin has a brain injury as well. Look at that. No brain.

CATHERINE: So you know I talked to Sam's teacher today. Remember I told you that if you go in there and volunteer more, that you could— She said that Head Start's really big with that. That you could even be, that they need subs and stuff. If you go and volunteer more—

DANI: But the thing is, is I don't like volunteering.

CATHERINE: Why?

DANI: Cuz I don't get paid for it. I'm sick of not getting paid for doing the stuff I do. You know?

CATHERINE: Do you think that that's a way to go through life thinking? You don't always— It's ok to help people.

DANI: I feel like I help people a lot.

CATHERINE: That's where our argument is.

DANI: I help, I think.

CATHERINE: But it's ok cuz you need a lotta help. And we help you.... So you could—

DANI: You say that, but I don't see it.

CATHERINE: But I just want you to get your life— You're so depressed over your life. And you don't, and I don't think that you say we don't understand your brain trauma. And we don't. We don't. We don't have it. We don't understand anything, but you also don't understand what we went through as a family when you almost died and how much it hurt us.

DANI: OK. What my family goes through. What do they go through?

CATHERINE: Really?

DANI: Yeah. What do you guys go through? Cuz seriously, you guys, I—

CATHERINE: You're my daughter.

DANI: I get that.

CATHERINE: You almost died. You don't have any friends. You can't play sports. You're sad. You don't see life the way that we see it, you know. Of course that hurts us.

DANI: But like—

CATHERINE: There's a part, when the accident happened, Dani, there's a part of me that died. I don't have brain trauma, but you were my mom. You took care of me. You did everything for me.

DANI: You mentioned that.

CATHERINE: Had you when I was 15. And then here it was, my daughter who was dying. And yeah, you've had to learn. But I was with you every single step of that accident. I wasn't in a coma, so in a sense you could say you were a little bit luckier. Cuz I watched every second of— I had the conversations with the people that you were gonna die, you weren't gonna live. When do we want to take you off the breathing monitor. That's not.... I have the nightmares.

DANI: And I get that. So like....

CATHERINE: It hurts us to see you sad. It hurts us to see you—It hurts me to see you cry yourself to sleep every night because you don't have any friends.

DANI: It's not just cuz I have no friends.

CATHERINE: It hurts me to see you try to be somebody that you're not just because you think that that's the way that people are gonna like you. In all honesty, people without brain trauma lose friends. People are mean to people without brain—

DANI: Ok Mom, but I don't lose friends—

CATHERINE: If you have the right people around you, the right friends, they would accept you for who you are.

DANI: [heavy sigh] I'm here now, and it's been 6 years and...what have I done that's positive? Except for graduation, but that's like—

CATHERINE: You lived, first and foremost.

DANI: I lived. Ok. But everyone always says this. Someone says, "You lived." I didn't ask. If I was me, if I knew this was my life, then—

CATHERINE: If you knew then—

DANI: If I knew then this was gonna be my life, I woulda asked to fucking die. I swear to God. I just fucking— Mmm. I don't like to talk about how much I hate it cuz it hurts my mom. But...I hate life, fucking.

CATHERINE: Why?

DANI: Cuz it's just stressful and unfair. And I don't feel right. I don't.... I don't know. I don't like it.

[distorted lyrical music]

DANI: Do you guys ever have volunteering?

LYNN: When you're 25 and up, yes, you are eligible to volunteer.

DANI: OK.

CHRIS: We have open mic, which is a perfect opportunity to be able to express yourself.

DANI: I have another question. I was here last week, and there was a really attractive female, and I talked to her for a minute. But it says on the rules, don't hit on older, younger people.

LYNN: Mmhmm.

DANI: Before you talk to someone everyone I talk to you, I say, "How old are you" before I talk to them? I'm not gonna hit on anybody, but what does that mean?

LYNN: Well, the first thing to understand when you talk about hitting on someone, that's not why we're here. Certainly, if you find someone attractive, yeah. But again, you've gotta realize—this is for you— that dating—if you're over age—dating someone underage is illegal.

DANI: Yeah.

LYNN: So that is a piece that just societally, you need to be aware of.

[excited voices talking, laughing]

MARIE: If you ever find a book you like, you can check them out from the library.

DANI: OK. "At 19 years of age, Marvelyn Brown was lying in a stark white hospital bed at Tennessee Christian Medical Center, feeling hopeless. A former top track and basketball athlete, she was in the best shape in her life that she was battling a sudden illness in the Intensive Care Unit." Like how surreal is this, you know? "The Naked Truth."

HOST: So if you wanna rap or sing or battle, whatever you wanna do, write your name and then the function. All right?

[several conversations]

DANI: Do you wanna read my poem so you could get a feeling what it's about?

HOST: Sure.

[music, conversations]

[Dani beat boxing]

HOST: Street ANGEL, is that your MC name?

DANI: Street ANGEL, well actually no, that's just my street name. I don't have an MC name, but I use that as my MC name too.

MC: OK, everybody. Welcome to Oasis's first rap battle! [cheers] This is a rainbow rap battle! Let's see. Who do we have first? I'd like to welcome Dani! Dani come up.

[cheers, applause]

MC: You got your beat?

DANI: Do I have beat? No, I don't have a beat, but I just have a poem. Attention goes to Dani. All right. Look, I have traumatic brain injury, and I was in a car accident about 6 years ago, and I almost died. It was this huge thing. I was in a coma for about a few weeks, and then I woke up, had this injury called traumatic brain injury, aka TBI. And I wrote this poem. It's called "Never Ending Trauma" by Dani Sanderson. That's me, all right? All right. It goes:

Why do they make fun of me when I look just like you?

What, you ain't got that clue?

I've been through trauma too

At a young age, I was 16, whoa

Hard car crash, 80 to 100 feet out back window, out I go

It's about 6 weeks later, and I wake from a coma

Talk about crazy

Listen here, and I'll tell ya

Just a few just seconds, moments later, I notice I can't walk

Wait. Can you hear me?

I can barely hear myself talk

Now picture you lying there

wondering what has happened to you

Just sitting there, thinking what's going on,

and what did you do? Just a few seconds later,

I notice there's a tube in my tummy

So I pull, and it's stuck

Now I'm thinking, wow Dani, let's talk about great luck

My mind is now racing

Someone help, I cry

Thinking to myself what is this, what happened, and what, did I die?

Cuz I thought I was dead, OK?

I'm lying in bed, lost in my head

Searching for an answer or even a clue

Why am I in this room, and it looks as if baby blue?

I'm still crying, now there's people everywhere

Saying this name, Danielle, it can't be me, this ain't no fair

Please someone tell me what has happened to me

Tell me am I alive, or is this a dream?

Someone please tell me cuz I'm begging here, feel me scream or some shit like that... stuff like that

[chuckles]

Even long after, I'm still thinking still

Crying Dani, stop, for the second life I got

Now, as if I wanted or as if I asked

Cuz if I knew my life was gonna be like this,

I sure would've passed.

By Dani. That's me.

[cheers, applause]

MC: Thank you, Dani! Give me some love. That's cool. That's cool.

DANI: All right. Thank you.

[music]

DANI: I have a question for you.

LYNN: Yes?

DANI: Has anyone told you you're beautiful today?

LYNN: Oh.

DANI: I wanna be the first.

LYNN: Dani, thank you.

DANI: All right. I got you.

LYNN: Thank you so much.

DANI: Mmhmm.

LYNN: I appreciate that.

DANI: I got you.

DANI: I'm 21. How old are you?

GIRL 1: I'm 18.

DANI: 18. You look older than 18. That's cool.

GIRL 2: How old are you?

DANI: 21.

GIRL 2: Really? Huh.

DANI: Yeah. People say I'm like 17.

GIRL 1: You look like you're like, yeah.

Let's see the pictures.

DANI: I have a question. You know Jesus says man's supposed to be with man. What do you think about that?

GIRL: God made Adam and Eve for each other.

DANI: Oh yeah. Adam and Eve, not Adam and Adam. Yeah. But it doesn't say in the Bible that I will go to hell for being a lesbian, right?

GIRL: No, it doesn't say that at all.

DANI: OK. I went to the Catholic store, and she brought the Bible out. And it said, "You have punishment for your sins." Does that mean I'm sinning every day being a lesbian. So does that mean my sin's are gonna be like—

GIRL: No. Definitely not. You, after all you've been through and everything, He's just gonna judge your heart. Cuz He knows how your heart is. And that's how it's gonna be. Anybody can tell you that you're gonna go to hell.

DANI: OK, but God is way more powerful than me.

GIRL: He is.

DANI: Do you know how much He put me up to? I was in high school for 7 fucking years, you know? That shit's rough, being 20 years old, just graduating from high school, you know? Anyways.

GIRL: Hey, you finished it.

DANI: I did.

GIRL: That's the thing. So many people that are 20 have dropped out of school and just left it at that. But yet, you kept going.

DANI: And I get that. I just I don't think it's fair. I just don't think it's fair. I just want someone to agree with me it's not fair. If that's OK, you know?

GIRL: Mmhmm. OK, I hear you. I agree with you. It's not fair. All right.

DANI: [giggles]

[mellow music]

This girl is me on a book, and it is so freaking cool. I guess you just have to read the book. I don't know if I showed you my book, but I'm doing this too. The cover of it was called "The Unexpected" cuz the accident was unexpected, and I thought that was a cool title. This is just pages and books and so many stories. My attempts. I wrote about my attempts. I tried to kill myself a few times, a lotta times actually.

"So due to all the mess with the kids at school and all the rejection of friendships and what not, I have become mad, and I was now 16, trying to kill myself every day. I walked in roads late at night. I overdosed a few times. I cut myself and hit my head against the walls" cuz I heard if I had any big impact to my head, I could instantly die. But anyways, I hit my head, and "there are more. I just have a hard time remembering them due to my brain injury."

So someone wrote, "We are proud of you." I said, "4 wat?"

"I find what calms me down is that I love music, OK? It's my savior. I suggest it for anyone if you're having a bad day. Just pop in your iPod and just get lost in the music. Your bad feelings just seem to drift away."

[hip-hop music]

I wrote this cuz I want people to know me, and I wanted to know myself. I have to reassure myself that I have been through this, Dani. I've been through hell and back a few times, and I have accomplished this, you know?

♪ ...a fire in disguise, you are blazing ♪

♪ I hope you don't let this world ♪

♪ put your fire, put your fire out ♪

This is the first time I've lived without family. Well, I left my Grandma's house because she doesn't like my choice of friends. And I never had my own house key, which pissed me off, cuz I was paying some of the rent there. And yeah. I needed to do my own thing, you know? I don't wanna live with someone who doesn't trust me, you know? I've been talking about it for 3 years, maybe 4. And I saw a chance, and I took it, you know? I pay half the rent here. Kayla pays the other half. So it works perfect.

ATHENA: Dani?

DANI: Yo.

ATHENA: You have less naked women in your room.

Actually, I haven't seen one.

DANI: Un momento, por favor.

ATHENA: [giggles]

DANI: I know, right?

ATHENA: Oh, that's great.

DANI: Is it 8:00 yet?

ATHENA: Mmm... maybe not. 7:30.

Wanna play Pacman?

DANI: [giggles]

Oh, hello. Hi! I see you too. Ha ha.

[Aha's ♪"Take On Me"♪]

You see that girl?

ATHENA: What girl? Did she say you could sit with her?

DANI: Aw, maybe—

ATHENA: Did you tell her we only wear pink on Fridays?

DANI: Call her to come over here. Call her to come sit over here. She looks lonely.

ATHENA: You tell her. You're sitting next to her.

DANI: [laughs]

ATHENA: I think she stole your style, though.

DANI: Oh, I see someone like you too. [giggles]

ATHENA: This is a strange parallel universe. [laughs] We're even drinking the same drinks.

DANI: I know, right? Oh, I like your drink. What are you drinking?

ATHENA: Have yours talk to mine. Oh wait, you talk to mine. I'll talk to yours.

DANI: OK [giggles].

ATHENA: That's confusing. Go. That's really weird. It's really unsettling. [laughs]

DANI: I don't like that. I don't like that at all.

ATHENA: They can't sit with us. They can't sit with us. You can't sit with me.

[crowds cheer, announcer's voice on PA]

ANNOUNCER: Welcome to Capitol City Pride, guys!

DANI: We're on at 3:00 to 3:30.

EJ: You're excited to rap? You're not nervous at all?

DANI: No, I'm fuckin' hella nervous. What're you talking about? I'm shaking in my pants right now.

EJ: You're gonna do awesome. You'll do awesome.

TAMARA: We're right there.

DANI: I see you.

TAMARA: Ok, so. You have enough Chapstick on.

DANI: I like to feel like it's slippery.

TAMARA: I love you, Dani.

DANI: I love you, too.

TAMARA: Kill it, ok? DANI: I'm gonna rock this house!

MC: OK, next, we have Dani, known as the Street ANGEL come here to do some beat boxing and rapping.

DANI: Awesome. Dani!

[crowd cheers, calling "Dani!"]

[dramatic beat]

DANI: All right. All right.

So YAY Gay all day

All right

You're always you every day You can be trans, queer, even hetero, I swear

Cuz we're all equal people How do the others dare?

See, they mock, judge But do they really know?

That there's constant teasing acts, you see I only seem to grow

That's right YAY Gay all day

You're always you every day

So screw all the haters and we'll fuck what they say OK.

[cheers]

So hold up, hold up, hold up. So this is no beat right here.

So I'm saying

If you're proud, get loud

Go ahead and stand up.

You're not standing up.

[cheers]

MC: That's more like it!

DANI: If you're proud, get loud

Go ahead and stand up and rep your preference

There should be no need to defense, OK?

Do what you like for it only makes sense

You see they have the right to be straight

So we have the right to be gay

So should I make myself clear

Or do I needa translate?

I don't think so. All right. [cheers]

All right well. Look, I'm gonna beat box just a little bit for you cuz I'm kinda out of breath right now. I'm shaking. OK.

[cheers]

MC: You're doing great, Dani. Keep it up! Who!

[beat boxes]

[cheers]

MC: Come on everybody! Give it up for Dani!

DANI: All right. Thank you!

All right. It's sunny now. I gotta go say hi to my family.

[music]

DANI: How come I was so stressed out for 3 weeks straight, nervous, anxiety. But it was great. Everyone loved it. I felt pretty confident about it, too. I think my beat boxing went hard. So we're good. All right, I gotta get ready for this talent show tonight and I'm really excited for that too. Cuz I love music. So I'm gonna go and find people to go do music with.