

The sun beamed, and humidity thickened the air on a sunny April day as four Auburn University students played a friendly yet competitive tennis match. One player, named Peyton Grochowski, dazzled her teammate as she served the ball to their opponents with an effortless, agile swoop.

A social work major with a passion for mental health and social change, Grochowski is a junior at Auburn University and a Huntsville, Alabama, native. Many, however, would not expect the reason behind her dedication to social work.

At the age of 16, after countless doctors appointments and various deadends, Peyton was diagnosed with Cushing's Syndrome. Shortly after her diagnosis, doctors discovered a brain tumor that was the result of her body's overproduction of the stress hormone, cortisol. After waiting a year for her surgery to remove the tumor from her pituitary gland, Grochowski's anxiety reached new heights.

Luckily, Grochowski's surgery was a success, and surgeons at the University of Alabama at Birmingham cleared her to leave the hospital and continue her lengthy recovery at home. Yet she had invisible emotional scars that needed attention as well.

Grochowski felt too apprehensive to tell her parents about the emotional distress the condition and her surgery caused to disclose it to them. "I tried to cope with it on my own which wasn't very helpful," said Grochowski. As time continued, however, and she started college, Grochowski discovered her true calling.

When she began her college career in August 2020, Grochowski likely wouldn't have believed anyone who informed her that she would stray from her chosen pre-med track. However, after

experiencing a change of heart at the end of her freshman year, Grochowski decided to change her major to social work. And she has never looked back.

“I want to help people who feel as overwhelmed as I did before and after my surgery by teaching them coping mechanisms and how to find the little joys in everyday life,” said Grochowski.

Today, she is immersed in all facets of social work and has valuable opportunities to apply what she has learned in the classroom in real life. Grochowski attends interdisciplinary clinics at hospitals and other mental health establishments in the Auburn-Opelika area as part of her course curriculum, where she interacts with real patients and gains more confidence in her skills.

Additionally, she teaches fun, energizing dance classes to adults with moderate to severe disabilities. Grochowski, who has danced since the age of three and played tennis since middle school, believes that moving your body allows your mind and soul to escape from the realities of daily life.

After graduation, Grochowski wants to make a big impact on her community. She plans to attend graduate school and obtain her Master of Social Work. This degree will allow her to achieve her career goal of becoming a licensed clinical social worker and opening her own private practice. Grochowski plans to specialize in young adults and wants to assist struggling high schoolers and college students with navigating the struggles that arise during adolescence.

“I’m looking forward to seeing the growth of each of my patients and the effects of my work,” Grochowski said. With her work ethic and passion for mental health under her belt, there’s no doubt she will.