

Two fateful words, rendered in the sedate Latin and Greek of medical-speak, heralded a long, challenging but ultimately triumphant road for Creighton University graduate Matthew Brewster.

Brewster suffered a “subarachnoid hemorrhage,” his family learned after he fell to the floor at his South Bend, Indiana home on Dec. 5, 2012. He was a junior in high school and a vein in his brain had exploded, causing indescribable pain, a stroke, a seizure and seeping of blood into areas of the brain where it did not belong.

It was the beginning of a long battle that brought Brewster from the edge of death, through a three-month coma, into a long course of rehabilitation and, eventually, to Creighton University, about which Omaha institution he knew nothing that fateful moment seven years ago.

“I lost all ability to do anything,” Brewster said. “Walk, talk, swallow, breathe, all of that was gone.”

The disaster, he said, might have struck due to nothing more exotic than a sneeze, or moving his head the wrong way. Seven years later, he conducts a telephone interview with grace, good humor and optimism, describing his conviction that his survival of a rupture that kills a third of its victims means something, that God has a plan for him that is yet unfolding.

How Brewster arrived at Creighton University, where he graduated last May with a four-year degree in health administration, is an unlikely story given that his family had no relationship with the school.

But his mother, a graduate of the University of Notre Dame, had heard something.

“A friend of ours here in South Bend had visited Creighton the previous fall with her son, and she raved about it,” says Shannon Brewster. “Our older daughter, Madeleine, attended Loyola University in Chicago and we were impressed with her Jesuit education so we encouraged Matthew to cast his net a bit wider.”

Brewster, who had planned to enter the Catholic University of Portland in Oregon, chuckles when he recalls the long road trip to Omaha, his mom at the wheel.

“I complained the whole way, the whole eight-hour car drive,” he says. “She dropped me off at Admissions, and I was super angry, but at 2 a.m. I called my mom and said, ‘Mom, I love it. I have to come here.’ And so I did.”

Brewster says he made close friends during his four years at Creighton, has especially high praise for Denise LeClair at the University’s Office of Disability and Accommodations, and remembers fondly lectures on the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar taught by the Rev. Peter Nguyen, SJ.

He said a faith inherited from his Catholic family, untried and untested, was fully challenged during the years of his recovery.

“After my injury, I just felt extremely atheist,” he said. “I just felt God could not put me through this pain. Who would take all this away from me?”

Over the course of the next two years, he said, he encountered many highly trained medical specialists who said God, or “a higher power” must have something in mind for him.

“If there were so many incredibly intelligent people who believed in a higher power, I just thought, ‘Well, who am I to sit here with my minimal education — just a junior in high school — and say there isn’t a God?’”

“At Creighton I got involved with the Catholic Student Organization and made friends with people from other religions — one was a Sikh — got involved with the Knights of Columbus, and my faith really blossomed.”

Brewster has since worked with FOCUS, a Catholic collegiate outreach organization, while continuing to walk the road to rehabilitation, which, he said, he probably always will to one degree or another.

And he has forged a continuing relationship between his family and Creighton University in the form of his younger sister, Amanda, who is a junior on campus currently serving in the Dominican Republic with Creighton’s Encuentro Dominicano program.

“She visited Creighton and absolutely fell in love with it,” says Shannon Brewster.

“We have three Jesuit educated kids, two Creighton.”