



Rosemarie Rossetti

Victorious Woman - February 2009

Resilience Triumphs Tragedy

"I couldn't have imagined that when I got out of the car that day, it would be the last time I would stand alone on my own two feet." Rosemarie Rossetti was talking about the day in 1998 that changed her life.

It happened the weekend of Rosemarie and Mark's 3rd wedding anniversary, on a beautiful Saturday afternoon in mid-June. Rosemarie and Mark decided the early summer weather was perfect for a bike ride. The couple mounted their bikes on the car and drove to their favorite bike path, a former railroad track that was part of Ohio's "rails to trails" system. They rode side by side for a while, and then Rosemarie got a little bit ahead of Mark.

All of a sudden, there was a sound like a gunshot. Looking around, Rosemarie heard Mark shouting at her. She heard the panic in Mark's voice, took it as a warning, and sped up. It wasn't what Mark was screaming for Rosemarie to do. What Mark saw when he looked around wasn't someone with a gun. Instead, Mark saw was a 3.5 ton tree, laced with live electric power lines, falling toward Rosemarie. Mark watched helplessly as the tree crashed down, right on top of her. Rosemarie never knew what hit her.

Mark thought Rosemarie was dead. He didn't know if the wires were still live or not and Mark gingerly touched them. When he realized they were safe, Mark climbed through the green and brown maze to Rosemarie.

The first thing Rosemarie remembers is looking up at Mark while she was laying on the trail. Totally disoriented, she couldn't figure out what happened or why she couldn't move. A couple people who saw what happened helped Mark move the tree off Rosemarie. Someone called for help, Paramedics came and Rosemarie was rushed by helicopter to the hospital. Seven vertebrae were crushed and her spinal cord was injured. She quickly had surgery where doctors grafted some of her hip bone to her spine and put a steel rod in her back to stabilize her.

"Some times in the hospital," Rosemarie remembers, "I tolerated the pain minute by minute. Then hour by hour. Then day by day. I wasn't prepared to be permanently disabled." Over time, Rosemarie was transferred from the hospital to a rehabilitation center. For over a month, she went to physical and occupational therapy daily.

Finally, Rosemarie was discharged and could go home. She was in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down. Rosemarie acknowledged that she was helpless without Mark. It was a new role for both of them, Rosemarie dependent and Mark as caregiver. Rosemarie not felt out of control, but says, "I lost all dignity." Also, she was angry. "I want my life back," she cried.

Those first months at home were the worst. Rosemarie was in constant pain and on heavy medication. The pills lessened the pain, but also slowed her thinking and her cognitive abilities.

Before long, depression set in. Her life, and Mark's life, and all their hopes and dreams were shattered. Adding to the challenges, until her disability insurance kicked in, their finances were shaky. They had to accept help and money from everyone who offered, from parents to the National Speakers Association, of which Rosemarie is a member. Though it was humbling, Rosemarie and Mark were grateful.

Still, Rosemarie says, "Life didn't look worth living in the early days. Some depression was shared by my husband. He was so burdened with responsibilities." Rosemarie wanted to die. She seriously considered suicide as a viable option. But then something changed her mind. "One turning point out of depression for me was reading the book "Man's Search for Meaning." Then I realized

that if I loved my husband, mother, brothers, family and friends, I would somehow live through this and get better.”

Instead of killing herself, Rosemarie went the other direction. Determined to become independent, she hired a personal care attendant so Mark could return to work. She started pushing herself physically, with the goal of regaining as much physical strength as possible. In addition to physical and occupational therapies, she went to the health club several times a week, lifting, stretching and doing cardio. As a result, Rosemarie “saw progress on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. I was starting to gain my daily living skills back.”

Over time, as Rosemarie gained more and more control over her body, she came to find out how resilient and adaptable she was – more than she ever dreamed possible. She started learning recreational adaptive sports like skiing, kayaking and horseback riding. She bought a three-wheeled recumbent tricycle that met her specific physical needs, so she and Mark could bicycle together again. She also learned how to drive with hand controls. Eventually, Rosemarie bought a minivan and had it adapted so she could drive again.

For mental toughness, Rosemarie read about others with disabilities and watched their videos. She started an audio journal describing her experience. She also wrote articles about what she was learning and her insights on coping with change. She received invitations to speak to groups, which led to an expansion of the career she had before the accident. As she found new meaning in her life, life started coming back to her.

In the past few years, Rosemarie and Mark began an exciting new project. It's called the Universal Design Living Laboratory and is a national demonstration home to showcase universal design and green building. At this stage, Rosemarie explains, “We are seeking funding through a construction loan and corporate sponsors. In this difficult economic time, we are challenged by the slowness to get a construction loan. Also, it's a challenge to get sponsors when the building industry is having a tough economic time in the USA.” Still, Rosemarie and Mark are persistent.

On the second anniversary of the accident and Rosemarie and Mark's fifth wedding anniversary, they did something that challenged both of their psyches. They returned to the trail that changed their lives. They rode their bikes back to the exact spot where the tree fell. Some of the tree was still there, cut up into logs. As the couple sat there, Rosemarie said they both had a myriad of emotions come up. On one hand, it was gut-wrenching; on the other hand, in that place of great personal sadness, the purging of emotional tensions helped them to heal.

Today, Rosemarie has her life back, it's just different now. She has work she loves, helping others survive and thrive after tragedy. Mark found new work that enables him to be with Rosemarie most of the time. The couple even took lessons in wheelchair dancing, and got good enough to present a showcase at a local dance studio event.

To other women, no matter what the challenge they face, Rosemarie says, “if life throws you a curve ball, you have to learn how to throw it back.” She offers you her **Five Lessons to Live By:**

- Do something new every day.
- Focus on a hopeful future, not on self pity.
- Believe that the impossible just might be possible.
- Allow more time to get things done and be patient with yourself
- To lower your stress, lower your expectations of other people.

Rosemarie, in these challenging times, you remind us that no matter what happens, we can overcome obstacles and persist. You are a model of victory through resilience through tragedy.

Thank You for the encouragement!

Learn more about Rosemarie at <http://www.rosemariespeaks.com> and visit the Universal Design Living Laboratory: www.UDLL.com