

A strong will to live

A Vadnais Heights woman approaches life with 'burning energy and optimism' even when confronted with life threatening experiences

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staff writer

It felt like a streak, she said. Like a pulled muscle in her breast.

"I was looking for a lump. It didn't feel like a lump," said Deb Nelson of Vadnais Heights.

But when Nelson received a postcard in the mail reminding her about a free mammogram, she decided to have it checked out.

A month later, in the fall of 2010, she went to her appointment and was told she needed a biopsy the following week.

"I knew. They didn't give me the diagnosis that day, but I knew," said Nelson soberly.

Rather than get overwhelmed with emotion, Nelson continued with her regularly scheduled activities: a weekend conference and a legislative prep rally to inform students at Century College about the upcoming elections.

Nelson started at Century College in 2009, a mid-career move to boost her hire-ability after being laid off and finding that she needed a college degree to achieve her goals. She had started college many years earlier right out of high school, but ended up dropping out to take a promotion at her job that required more hours than she could handle as a fulltime student.

On May 11, Nelson graduated from Century with four degrees: an associate of fine arts degree in music, an associate of arts degree, an education associate in science degree, and a paraeducation associate in science.

She accomplished this in three years, while dealing with cancer, a mastectomy to remove the three tumors found in her breast, chemotherapy, and recovery. She was also heavily involved with Century student senate, the Theta Kappa Honor Society, and several college committees.

"She has represented her fellow students tremendously," said Rick Nelson (no relation), faculty adviser for the student senate.

"She's got a lot of fight in her. Sometimes she takes on too many activities, but I think, because of her health issues, it was a distraction for her," said Rick Nelson.

Nelson said she often did homework during chemotherapy sessions and used every moment to its fullest while at the hospital.

"I saw it as a chance to perk up the nurse's day," Nelson said with a smile. "Not all patients were very chipper. I guess I made it my point to be in a good mood and to make sure I



Deb Nelson

could make their day better."

Her sister-in-law was a major support for her during this time, bringing her to appointments and giving her advice. Her sister-in-law had several loved ones who had experienced cancer. Nelson's middle son, Ryan, often went with her to chemotherapy sessions, as did her other two college-age children on occasion.

"I always felt like I needed to entertain them when they came with me," Nelson said, bursting into loud laughter.

"She's a person that doesn't complain, 'Woe is me'", said Elliot Wilcox, one of Nelson's music teachers at Century.

Wilcox said Nelson fits into a class of people who take on challenges with "burning energy and optimism."

Some can survive. Some can overcome. Some can survive, overcome, and thrive. And that's what she's done," said Wilcox.

"I need to be a productive member of society," Nelson said, choking up.

Brushes with death

Nelson's battle with cancer isn't her first life-threatening experience.

When she was less than two years old, Nelson was riding in the car with her mother and almost fell out of the car.

"I must have been playing with the door, and I swung out on the door, hanging out of the car," said Nelson. "To be honest I probably thought it was fun, knowing me.

"And the guy behind her was swearing and honking his horn," Nelson added gleefully.

"My mom was really calm, and just slowed the car down enough to stop and pull me back in."

Even earlier in her life, Nelson choked on a safety sucker.

"I turned blue," said Nelson. "The doctor said I should have died, but because I was so young I had a strong will to live, so I did. But I think even if I had been older I would have lived. I've always had a strong will to live."

Nelson's brushes with death didn't stop in childhood.

Sometime during or after her senior year of high school -- Nelson can't quite remember -- she slid off an icy road and down a steep embankment in her car.

"My life literally flashed before my eyes," Nelson said. "It was like all these scenes went by of my life."

She came away from the accident unscathed, and her vehicle had only a flat tire.

"The snow protected me," said Nelson.

In the 1980s during a sales call for work, Nelson's Mercury Cougar was hit broadside on the driver's door when a driver ran a red light and hit her in an intersection.

She must have blacked out, because all she remembers is a metallic sound and then hearing someone asking her for her purse and ID. She told them the car was locked, so they wouldn't be able to get in -- not realizing the windows were smashed out. Slowly, Nelson realized she was curled up, compressed under the weight of her crushed vehicle.

"They had to pull me out with the jaws of life," said Nelson. Nelson was rushed to the emergency room with broken ribs, strained muscles on one side of her body, and a minor brain injury resulting in ongoing short-term memory loss.

"I felt so bad because they were getting cut working on me. I was covered with glass from head to toe, but yet I was barely cut. I do think it was a miracle," said Nelson.

"I believe in miracles. I believe in prayers, too. God kept me going," said Nelson.

She also finds strength from her music, both playing and writing pieces for the piano.

"She's unflappable at the piano," said Wilcox.

"It's cathartic for me," said Nelson.

In July, Nelson will go in for an appointment with her oncologist. Nelson doesn't know at what point she's considered in remission, and didn't think to ask her oncologist last time they met, she said.

"But she said the prognosis is good," said Nelson.

"I do believe God wants what's best for me. I don't think he wants bad things happening to you ... I believe God is with me all the time. I'm never alone," said Nelson.

Nelson is uncertain what the future holds, but hopes she can one day find the financial means to continue her college education to receive a bachelor's degree, and possibly become a teacher.

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