VM Profiles in Courage

Pat Fronzaglia
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The Early Years

I was born in Dunkirk, New York, on October 10, 1951, the daughter of Ed and Rose Rozumalski. I have three brothers. When I was eleven, we moved to Erie, Pennsylvania. In 1969, I entered St. Vincent Nursing School in Erie and became a registered nurse. I married a wonderful man named Roy Fronzaglia on June 22, 1974. We had three great sons who are all now married. I have six grandchildren—four girls and two boys—ranging in age from 6 months to 6 ¾ years old.

I was a pretty active person, living a very busy life. I was employed at Erie Infant and Youth Home for 7 ½ years before working as a nurse for the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Sisters of Mercy in their infirmaries. My family was very much involved in our parish, St. John the Baptist, where I was a Minister of Hospitality. My husband and I were Eucharistic Ministers, lectors and on the school boards for our sons’ elementary and high schools. We chaired a fundraiser called the Feather Party for five years. We were also in the Deacon Program. Our boys were altar servers and musicians at Mass. We did things together as husband and wife, and many activities as a family.
Life’s Many Twists

In 1998, five years into working at the infirmaries, my husband became ill with cancer. On June 8, 1999, my life dramatically changed. My husband died of T-cell Lymphoma exactly two weeks before our 25th wedding anniversary. Only five months later, I was injured in a car accident. Pain has been my constant companion. I suffered neurological damage which has been diagnosed as Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy (RSD). I had to stop working in December, 1999, and ended up in bed. I was given physical and water therapy. The water therapy caused me to tear my left rotator cuff due to pulling on the railing while getting up the pool steps. I underwent rotator cuff surgery. After more setbacks, the hospital was supposed to schedule a physical therapy evaluation. Even a week later, I had not gone yet, which greatly upset my surgeon. He called and set it up for the next day. I had the evaluation, but when I got home, I was experiencing a different kind of pain in my left leg. It was red, warm to the touch and swollen. As a nurse, I correctly diagnosed a deep vein blood clot. I was hospitalized for ten days, during which time I developed drop foot—first one foot and then the other. That was the last time I walked.

I had only two months of rehab because the insurance company said, “No more therapy.” From their viewpoint, it was taking too long to recover. Shortly thereafter, the company went bankrupt. Since it was a pre-existing condition, no other insurance company would pay for therapy. While in rehab, I developed my very first urinary tract infection due to a nurse’s improper catheterizing technique. Soon afterwards I started having severe pain in my bladder. Because of the pain in my legs, knees and bladder, I was in bed for the next two years. That circumstance created many new problems, one of which is that my knees do not bend. I became extremely depressed—feeling scared, alone and useless. I had not worked in over two years. With both my husband’s medical bills and mine mounting, I used my credit cards until the situation was out of control. I filed for bankruptcy which was a blow to my self-worth. I could not pray. I felt more isolated and very much alone. On top of that, I started having constant pain in my bladder. I was put on several different medications because the specialist told me I had interstitial cystitis, resulting from a major bladder infection. The doctor informed me it would not get better. Since I was not walking, he felt I should have a urostomy (removal of bladder and replaced with a bag).
Since that procedure was going to be done, my gynecologist also recommended that I have a hysterectomy. So, in December of 2003, I had a seven-hour surgery that went terribly awry. I swelled up with about 40 pounds of fluid, was hemorrhaging and in a coma. I had another seven-hour surgery to try and save my life. I needed 19 units of blood, my heart stopped and I had a collapsed lung. Apparently I have a severe blood dyscrasia (bleeding problem due to poor functioning blood cell-clotting factor). I was on a ventilator for 7-8 days in the Intensive Care Unit, and then another week in a step-down unit. My middle son was there the week I was in I.C.U., leaving his wife and baby and keeping his brothers advised.

**Back in the Swing of Things**

I guess it was a miracle I survived. After that surgery is when my life began to change for the better. An acquaintance, Jeanie, had started visiting me in the hospital and then at home. She was very upset that I was in bed all the time. We began doing things together, including outings in my van. I started feeling that God wanted me to live and do something with my life; otherwise I figured I would have died that day. I was smiling and laughing more.

I decided to create a Care and Concern Committee for people in need at my church, St. John the Baptist. Thinking of my experiences, I felt I needed to help others so they would not go through what I did. Well, it took off BIG TIME. I then joined our Parish Council. I also resumed being a Eucharistic Minister and lector, but I could not be on the altar like everyone else. Since it was not accessible, I felt isolated. I approached our pastor and asked if we could get some accessibility for myself and for several other parishioners. He said only if I could find the funds without soliciting parishioners. I spent many months researching and calling for grants. I eventually got enough money for an automatic door opener.
My friend, Jeanie, kept pushing me to join Holy Rosary Church because it was totally accessible. It was a hard decision because I had been at St. John’s for 23 years. I prayed to God for an answer. One day I woke up and decided it was what I needed to do. I was so welcomed at Holy Rosary. They encouraged me to lector and be a Eucharistic Minister, which I was able to do with my peers on the altar for the first time. I have been chairperson for our Parish Festival for the last four years, and I am on the Parish Council. Jeanie helped me get my zeal for life again.

New Directions

In 2004, I attended the Victorious Missionaries’ National Fall Conference at the request of Jackie Johnson. I was truly amazed and impressed with the people there. Everyone had such a positive and uplifting attitude. When you go through tough times, you don’t think about other people and their problems, or even realize that their situations can be worse than yours. I went back to Erie with excitement and became President of the Erie VMs, which had been nonexistent for several years. Our chapter started out small, but has blossomed over the past few years to a roster of 35 members. Our group is growing in friendship, in spirituality and has become a family. We are a service-oriented group that undertakes a couple major projects every year and some smaller endeavors. For example, we have a picnic in August for the patients, families and staff at the Veterans Administration Hospital. We play Bingo for prizes and serve a picnic supper. We also have a dinner in the fall for the homeless or needy families. We have a meat loaf dinner with the works, and they love it. We also send our empty prescription bottles to a mission. We visit and send cards to a nursing home or to hospital patients. In March 2010, we had our first retreat, and it was a wonderful experience for everyone! I am extremely proud of the Erie VMs. Leading this chapter has given me a purpose and a direction, and it keeps reminding me that someone is always worse off than you.
Facing the Challenges

There are difficulties having a disability. There are some individuals in this world that apparently have never encountered people with disabilities. They pull into handicap spots. They yell out the window or honk at you to get out of the street—not realizing how difficult the sidewalks can be. They stare at you like you are from Mars. They talk to you like you are incapable of understanding. They don’t respect you when you graciously tell them you can do it yourself, as well as many other trials.

I think one of the biggest challenges for me is asking for help. I am an independent person, and it is very hard to request assistance. I feel like I am imposing or that I am less of a person if I can’t do it myself. I have realized, though, that it is necessary for individuals to witness people with disabilities doing a variety of things so the uninformed can learn and also receive blessings for the acts of kindness and compassion that are extended to them.

Lessons Learned

No matter the circumstances that a person faces, two things are true: 1. There is always someone who has to deal with worse hardships than you.

2. Faith can sustain you through any difficulty. Reaching out to assist others reminds you that there is a purpose in life that only you can fulfill.

Volunteering your time to help others boosts your own self-worth and deepens your ability to empathize with others. Wherever our unique journey in life takes us, we do not travel alone. God is always beside us offering love and encouragement, especially during the most challenging times. Knowing we can turn to God, family, friends or other members of our support team, like the VMs, convinces us that we have someone in our corner cheering us on. Victorious Missionaries has truly impacted my life. I look forward to the National Fall Conference in October when I can reunite with my friends.