

A.P.O.V. *

*Alumni Point of View

My Second Life

How illness and injury uncovered new talents—and purpose.

By JENNIE FLOYD, EMBA'92

ON THE SURFACE, 1998 should have been the best year of my life. I married my soul mate in a beautiful ceremony overlooking the Pacific Ocean in April, I had a prestigious job as the regional manager of a telecommunications consulting company, and I was living in the beautiful San Francisco Bay Area, in a home on the west side of the bay. Yet, an invisible enemy that had been stalking me for years finally caught up with me in November of that year, when I collapsed on a business trip. Within two weeks my doctor told me that if I continued my current lifestyle, I would not live five more years. I was 40 years old.

Poor health was nothing new for me. I had suffered a series of serious illnesses in my life, including mononucleosis at 5, meningitis at 14, and viral pneumonia during my third semester at Vanderbilt's Owen School in 1991. I also suffered from a prolapsed mitral valve of my heart, for which I had been hospitalized in 1984 and for which I was on medication. But the illness that struck me down in 1998 was something different, extremely difficult to diagnose. In 1993 I had begun suffering from mysterious crushing fatigue and severe

pain in my arms and legs, which felt like they were leaden weights. By 1996 I was experiencing migraines nearly weekly, and many of my joints had begun to swell and ache. My physician, a traditional general practitioner, ran numerous tests to rule out MS, AIDS and brain tumors, but in the end could only tell me to reduce my stress.

I did lead a hectic and stressful lifestyle, but I was convinced that I had a real illness. In November I saw a new doctor, one who practiced both Western and alter-



native medicine, who ordered me to take a three-month medical leave. He began intensive treatments and tests, including acupuncture for my pain and migraines, a diet based on my newly discovered food allergies, vitamin and herbal supplements, homeopathic remedies and chiropractic manipulation, as well as Western allopathic treat-

ments such as antidepressants to reduce my pain. However, gradually it became clear that I was not going to get well in three months, or six, or nine, if ever. In 2000 I was finally diagnosed with lupus, a potentially fatal autoimmune disease in which the body essentially becomes allergic to itself and for which there is yet no cure, and I retired in October on full Social Security disability.

In a way, it was a relief just to get a firm diagnosis. Finally, I knew what was wrong with me, and that it was not just “stress” or “all in my head,” as I had been told by too many Western physicians. But the challenges of going from a highly functioning, well-paid, respected executive to a homebound disabled person were considerable. I faced severe depression initially over the loss of my job and the status it carried with it, the reduction in income, and the loneliness of staying home alone.

Friends couldn't easily comprehend how ill I really was, since lupus is not a disease that makes you look “sick.” My husband and family were in denial for years, sure that I would be able to return to my old life. It was not until I had an accident in 2000 and ruptured a disc in my lower back, followed by a ruptured appendix later that year, combined with the lupus diagnosis, that my family and I finally gave up on the dream of our lives getting back to normal. We had to learn to live with a “new normal.”

My husband and I had to take steps to keep our marriage strong, and I had to work on slowing down and keeping up my self-esteem. Some of these steps included psychotherapy, a support group for me, getting a pug dog (my first pet as an adult), hiring help with housecleaning and gardening, and purchasing a recumbent bike so I could still exercise. I had always been very active, and initially I was too ill to do much of anything.



NATALIE COX MEAD

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Daily walks with my puppy were lifesavers, and we still go to the dog park every day, where I have a regular group of friends, most of whom are old and/or disabled. They understand what I have gone through and have been invaluable to me, since most of my old work friends have drifted away, unable to relate to my life as it is now. But my best therapy has been the arts—singing, dancing, writing and acting.

I have been singing since I was 3 years old, semi-professionally since age 20. Early in my retirement, as I searched to find a new purpose for my life, I formed a jazz band with local musicians. We self-produced a CD and played a number of gigs for about two years, but there was not enough work to sustain us. Toying with the idea of getting a degree in music, I decided to take a course in musical theatre at our local community center. My

teacher encouraged me to audition for *Little Shop of Horrors* at our community theatre, and even though at 42 I thought I was too old to start acting, I got a part and have been working steadily ever since.

I felt like I had come home when I began to act. I loved the theatre, the acting community, the applause—everything except the hard work, which was very difficult for me physically. So I took up working in film, which is generally much easier on the body—no months of rehearsals, no singing and dancing, no long runs. Since 2001 I have appeared in more than 50 shorts, feature films and TV shows, including *American Wedding*, *Grey's Anatomy* and *Arrested Development*. I have just been cast in my first lead in an independent feature film, *The Attorney*, to begin shooting in the Bay Area in September.

My journey has not been the one I expected when I graduated from Owen in 1992. But the obstacles posed by illness have taught me lessons about patience, perseverance and compassion that I cannot imagine learning any other way. Being an active part of the creative community has fulfilled my lifelong desire to be a performer. The arts have restored joy to my life and allowed me to feel that I am still able to contribute to society, though not in the way that I expected to. New treatments continue to be developed for lupus and other autoimmune illnesses, some of which have allowed me to regain much of my old strength and to manage my pain and fatigue, although my disease is not yet in remission.

I hope a cure for lupus will be found, and that new research will enable my spinal-cord injury to be repaired. But even if I am able to return to work full time, I no longer have any desire to return to my old "normal" life in the corporate world. I hope one day to be able to combine the skills I learned at Owen and during my 20-year business career to pursue full-time work in the arts community, but for now I am content to work part time as an actress. I have reached a place of acceptance and believe that now is truly the best time of my life, and I can't wait to see what the future holds.

Doing is not more important than just *being*—we all have intrinsic value as human beings no matter what we do for a living. ▼