

One Step at a Time

How I Conquered Cancer

by Lenor Chappell



It was my birthday, March 22, 1974. I was a fashion model, the wife of a rancher, and the mother of two little girls. I found a hard lump on my left leg. Within a month, I lost my leg and part of my hip. I survived, my family survived ... only God knows how.

When I was told that the lump was a malignant cartilage tumor attached to my pelvis, I was stunned. But when my doctors offered a cure – the radical amputation of my left leg and half of my pelvis with no chemo or radiation, I jumped at the chance. At that moment, my leg became totally insignificant in comparison to my life.

In the beginning, I couldn't bear to look in the mirror at my altered image, face family and friends who couldn't hide their pity, lie with my husband, manage phantom limb pain and morphine addiction, learn to walk with a prosthetic limb, deal with depression,

No one is exempt from misfortune. I didn't choose my circumstance, but I could choose how to respond.

and finally, adjust to doing everyday tasks on just one leg. But through patience, grit, and faith, I overcame these obstacles.

Who do you see when you look at me? I feared others would look at me and see a deformed, crippled person. Or could I project that I was the same woman who had left them just a few weeks before? My attitude was, "I am a woman still." And because I refused to surrender to

self-pity, respect was mine – leaving no room for sympathy.

Let's be honest, if my total sexuality was in my left leg before I lost it, then I didn't have a heck of a lot going for me. That first night with my husband, I bathed in my favorite bath oil, donned my sexiest negligee, and revealed my intact side first. Because

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I projected that I was still a woman – feminine and eager for sex, how could he resist?

You're becoming a drug addict. When I first awoke to the flat of the sheet, it did not feel like my leg was missing – it hurt too much. I was given morphine. Soon I was unable to discern pain from addiction. When my doctor blurted out, "I'd rather you'd

died of cancer than become a drug addict," I got off the drugs cold turkey. Today, the relentless phantom pain is still with me. But I cope by calling it a "sensation," and this sets me up psychologically for a different reaction: the sensation that my left leg is still with me.

Moments when I dreamed I had two legs ... Friends and doctors prepared me for extended bouts of depression, but I decided to limit the down times to moments – not days or weeks. Moments

when my young daughters would cry out and I would try to run to them. Moments when I realized I'd never walk again with grace or ease. But I knew if I succumbed to timeless despair, my life would become hopeless.

How to buy a leg? Back in the early 70s, it was difficult to buy a prosthetic limb for a radical amputee, and I refused to accept the gruesome limbs that were shown to me. I finally found a prosthetist who built me a "Barbie doll" leg, which I've been wearing versions of for the past 35 years. Recently, I was fitted with a computerized, hydraulic limb called a C-Leg®, which meant I had to learn to walk all over again. Now I walk normally without fearing my limb will collapse. The C-Leg saves my right knee from wear and tear, and no one would guess I'm not a whole, complete woman.

How do you do everything on one leg? I learned to be patient in all aspects of life – simple things like carrying a cup of coffee to my husband, slowly but surely, to guarantee he gets

a full cup. Taking on the responsibilities of life on one leg is a privilege because I'm grateful to be alive and independent.

I conquered cancer by choice and attitude. No one is exempt from



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misfortune. I didn't choose my circumstance, but I could choose how to respond. I decided to accept it – but not be defined by it. My cancer thrust me into a life of more meaning than I could have ever imagined. It gave me purpose to inspire others to get back on their feet and back into life.

Editor's Note: Lenor Chappell is the author of *One Step at a Time* and its sequel, *The Next Leg of My Journey*. For more information about Lenor, her books, and her lectures, visit LenorChappell.com. ■