

MIKE AND PAM'S STORY OF LOVE AND ENDURANCE

Once upon a time there was a very handsome gentleman (in the true southern sense of the word) who was very much a confirmed bachelor. He was kind of active in a singles group called "Parents without Partners." He had attended a dance even though he didn't like to dance that much, but he did like to people watch. While he was there this single lady caught a glance of him, focused in on him and decided to try to get him to dance with her. This is how our story began.

Mike and I dated off and on for almost 14 years. Always we seemed to drift back to each other. Mike was a man who always opened doors for me, even car doors, and treated me like a real lady. This was something that was foreign to me, as I had been in several very abusive relationships. Oh, don't get me wrong we would have our moments but Mike was always my best friend. I could always count on him to tell me the truth even if it wasn't what I wanted to hear. Pretty much from first day we met I knew he was "the ONE." Mike and I both lived in Wichita, KS for a while and then he moved to Charleston, SC in 1997 and me, to Crestwood, KY in 1999. We kept in touch by phone and several times I flew to Charleston to visit. We had talked of marriage a time or two but one of us would get cold feet or back out for one reason or another. Finally, in December 2004 he was going to come to Crestwood to visit and I felt sure he might "pop the question." Then at the last minute he called and said he "wasn't coming because he was thinking of dating another woman and that just wouldn't be right." I was crushed, really hurt and vowed to myself to never call him again. Little did I know that Mike had to go to the hospital for some problems and ended up having a Cardiac Ablation and then, in February, a pacemaker.

Then on February 14th, 2005 I was watching the movie, "The Guardian," which made me really think of Mike, because he had been in the Coast Guard as a rescue swimmer. I called him...and asked "How is your love life?" He laughed and said "I was have been thinking about you a lot lately and was wondering if you would consider just going ahead and marrying me?" How romantic, and even over the phone! He then proceeded to tell me what had happened, (the problems and ending up with a pacemaker). I did say "Yes." We began making plans and he agreed to move to KY. In June 2005 I flew to Charleston, SC and began helping Mike move to KY. Here was this guy who was leaving his brother and family, a job he loved just to be with me. God moves in mysterious ways.

When I was helping him move I noticed he was more short of breath than he should have been and was worried with his cardiac history. I am a LPN and work on a Medical Surgical floor. I usually can recognize cardiac problems. Mike said after everything we had been through trying to get together he was not going to his cardiologist in South Carolina but would go after we got settled in Kentucky. This was the beginning of the hardest part of our story. I set up an appointment with a cardiologist the day after we were married. Some honeymoon huh! So over the course of the next few months and lots of testing it was determined that he had severe mitral valve prolapse. We then began planning for a valve replacement. We knew with the fact that Mike had previously had two open heart surgeries that he was at an increased risk. All Mike wanted to do was to get back to work. Even though he was retired military he had been working with mentally challenged kids in special needs classrooms in an elementary school, and he loved it.



On August 28th, 2005 we went to an informational meeting at our church and both signed living wills (again another God moment). Then on August 29th Mike had a cardiac catheterization, which went very well. The following day he had the mitral valve replacement. Approximately six hours later a nurse from ICU (who I had worked with before - another God moment) came out to the waiting room and told me she thought Mike had possibly had a stroke because he was not responding to her when she was on his left side. She wanted me to come in and see if he would respond to me, but I had to be calm. I was really scared, but in fact she was right. Why Mike and why us? I was really upset and scared, not to mention how Mike was feeling. Mike had thrown a clot which had affected a large part on the right cerebellum. This was the beginning of his journey to try to come back.

I remember just like yesterday standing at the end of Mike's ICU bed with my dear friend and surrogate mother, Nancy Swanson as the "not so kind" neurologist proceeded to tell me "we don't think he will ever walk again, there will be no expected movement from the left arm, his vision was badly affected, we don't know if he will be able to talk much and we don't know how much of his mentality he will have." I know that neurologists often paint a bad picture in hopes that they are wrong, but this was really scary. This was a very bleak picture for newlyweds. We had so many dreams of traveling, going to Germany and we had only been married for 2 months.

Over the course of the next 2 months we began attempting to find how much we had to work with and trying to get started with rehab. I had very little support from my family as they lived in Wichita, KS and Mike's family lived in South and North Carolina. I was thrown in to making financial decisions, rehab and therapy decisions all while knowing I needed to work full time. We already had enough financial problems but now it was really bad. With the help of some very supportive friends, church and such, we began trying to figure out how to get Mike home. We lived in a small 2 bedroom apartment which was not wheelchair accessible. The apartment complex would not let us out of our lease. I began searching for any and all the help I could find. What a maze to negotiate!!! I began talking with anyone who could give me information of where to go and what to do. I began trying to get Mike to move, talk and give me signs of where he was. I lived day to day not sleeping much at night for trying to find out anything I could. This is one of the things you will hear from each and every caregiver... there is no one handbook or collection of information - you have to search it out. Mike would get frustrated with me for taking pictures of him at rehab and for trying to find ways for him to focus on what we had and continuing to strive for more. I will always remember the day we began really trying physical therapy and it taking 4 strong people to get him out of bed and to the chair. Then after 5 minutes he began saying "he wanted to go back to bed NOW." How was I going to do this at home and work? I am no stranger to adversity but this for the guy I wanted for 14 years!!! What about our dreams to travel?

Fast forward to now. We have been so blessed to have been able to have a house built and I tried to design it as wheelchair friendly as possible. We did exhaust all reserve funds we have. We built it across the street from a couple who we fell in love with at SIRH Stroke camp. Paul had a stroke with similar challenges as Mike and Betty, his wife is like the "sister" I never had and she knew the road I was walking down. Little did we know the very weekend we moved in Paul would have a massive heart attack and go to heaven. He was never able to see the inside of the house. We were and are here to support Betty and she is a lot of help to us.

We are very active in the Baptist East stroke support group and consider the members extended family. I am blessed to have a job which allows me to schedule the 3rd Thursday of each month off in order for us to go. I also attempt to take vacation time to go to SIRH stroke camp with Mike each year. I attempt to help Mike to have a complete and fulfilling life by attending and being active in church, going to movies, out to eat, and traveling when we can. I still work full time in LaGrange, KY and we live in Henryville, IN. I worry about changing jobs but the commute is really starting to get to me, not to mention 12 hour shifts. I worry that I might get a job that wouldn't let me off to go to support group or camp. Scrapbooking is like a release for me and allows me to show both Mike, myself and others that we are truly blessed and that there is LIFE AFTER A STROKE. One thing that we both try to do and to encourage others with is that they are not victims but survivors. This does not mean that we both don't get down but we try to lift each other up. We do have our struggles but all in all life is good.

Dreams that Mike have include always wanting to go to the Grand Canyon, Hawaii, an Alaskan Cruise, Disney, back to Michigan, Washington DC, Niagara Falls and going out to Las Vegas. The one dream I would love to fulfill for him is to sometime to take a RV trip He would have to progress to where he could get up and down the steps and be able to access the bed. These are all dreams but not completely out of the question....with some work. I still fall in love with those beautiful, dreamy blue eyes day after day. I miss the hugs and such sometimes but we continue to strive to better our relationship. So much of the time spouses are thrown into a caretaker role and struggle to hang on to the spousal role. I do occasionally wonder why but the Lord knows what he is doing. Mike would like to let me take a trip with a friend down the road but I would feel guilty leaving him or taking money out of our budget for someone to help him while I was gone instead of paying bills. I had to use credit cards for some of the things we needed before some of the benefits came in. It is hard for me to have someone to come in to stay with him because he does need help to bathe, some dressing, going to bed at night, fixing meals and other things. He is and always will be my best friend and husband!!! Life is good but different.

