

A Second Char

An ostomy becomes part of a long recovery after a motorcycle accident

By Rolf Benirschke

The path to ostomy surgery is often a winding one, fraught with years of pain and bleeding, accompanied by endless tests and scopes and uncertainty. Many people struggle for years before having ostomy surgery. Not so for Beth Hudson. The decision she made that ultimately led to her ostomy had nothing to do with her intestines.

It had to do with opting to take the “long way home” on her Harley Davidson motorcycle after returning from a trip to Stowe, Vermont with her husband, Jay. About a half mile from home, Jay waved and peeled off to take the “short way” home while Beth decided she wanted to enjoy the ride just a little longer. Unfortunately, Beth never made it home that day. Rounding a curve, she had a head-on collision with an SUV that landed Beth unconscious, face down in a ditch overgrown with poison ivy.

Didn't Make It Home

When Jay heard sirens in the distance, he jumped in his car and arrived at the scene of the accident, fearing the worst. They were soon realized when the nurse who would be attending Beth on the life flight to the trauma center instructed him, “Sir, I would suggest you kiss your wife goodbye before we take off because I don't think she is going to make it.”

When she arrived at the hospital, it was determined that Beth had multiple broken bones, massive internal injuries, a damaged kidney, a ruptured bladder and a traumatic brain injury. Her kidney injury would require that Beth go on dialysis for 17 months and was immediately put on the transplant list that she remains on today. Beth has no memory of the first couple of months following the accident as she was placed in an induced coma. In her first 30 days in the hospital, she would require 33 surgeries! Once again, her husband and two adult daughters were presented with a horrible prognosis – their wife and mother had only a 5-10% chance of survival.

After getting woken up from the induced coma, the

medical team kept her in a hospital or rehab facility in Boston for the next seven months. Her body was “frozen in place” by two external fixators stabilizing her pelvis and sacrum as well as her entire left leg. Those early days were really touch and go for Beth and a huge challenge for the medical team. Her case was reviewed and evaluated each morning and a decision was made whether to continue treatment or let her life slip away.

To make matters worse, the powerful painkillers she was on caused terrible hallucinations and, with a routine that alternated between five hours of sleep and three hours of wound care, did not help her mental state. Beth remembers being so weak

that she did not even have the strength to pick up her cell phone. It was an almost unimaginable nightmare.

As Beth's painstaking recovery continued, she became aware of her ostomy but was never involved in changing the pouch or caring for her stoma. The nurses impressed upon Beth that she “really needed to learn how to manage her ostomy” and Beth was in full agreement. But when she asked for some training, the response was always the same, “Sorry, we don't have time to teach you that today.”

Nursing Home Surprise

When Beth was finally moved to the skilled nursing facility before going home, she was astonished when she found out that the nurses there had never seen an ostomy. Beth remembers saying incredulously, “You gotta be kidding me! This is a nursing home!” And while she had seen the pouch changed at least a hundred times while she was in the hospital, we all know that “seeing” is much different from “doing”, and it took Beth quite a few anxiety filled minutes to complete her first change.

Upon returning home, Beth was mortified when she opened the box of supplies that had been ordered for her by the nursing facility. Apparently, they did not understand her specific size and shape and the box was filled with mismatched wafers and pouches that didn't even go together! She was shocked. Fortunately, thanks to

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her home health provider, she was able to procure some emergency supplies and soon found the right appliance. Although she can laugh about it now, she remembers, "As a newbie ostomate, that created a lot of anxiety and stress that I certainly didn't need!"

What's A Wound Nurse?

Shortly after Beth returned home, she had an accident. She fell out of her wheelchair and was back in the hospital for ten days due to a huge internal hematoma. She vividly remembers the day because one of the nurses asked her about the wound nurse's evaluation of Beth's stoma. Beth looked back at her dumbfounded and replied, "Wound nurse? What's that? You mean there are people out there who are trained to help with this?" She couldn't believe it and wondered why she had never had the chance to speak to one.

As Beth's slow recovery crept along, she struggled with the lack of mobility in her injured left leg that had never really healed properly. While amputation had been considered early on, because it had not been life threatening, Jay was adamant that Beth be allowed to make that decision when she woke up and was coherent. Well, 14 months after the accident, Beth decided it was time and her left leg was amputated just below the knee. She firmly believes that it was the "best decision I ever made."

A recovery this long takes a toll on everyone, especially her husband. "He is a 'fixer' and he could not fix me," Beth recalls. He also became very protective of Beth and was afraid of her doing anything where she might get hurt again. She recalls having to sneak out to drive her car for the first time after her accident while he was at work! Beth encouraged her husband to seek therapy and continued to do her best to calm his fears while saying, "Let me try again, let me figure it out. I will have some failures, but this is the only way I can get back to living my life."

And Beth shared her own emotional struggles during her recovery, "Yes, I was angry at God for a long time



Top: Hudson swimming at Mermaid Camp at Weeki Wachee State Park, FL. Above: Hudson at Sprague Lake, Rocky Mtn National Park.

and asked, 'Why me?'" She recalls crying for days upon her return home fearing that her life was over and that there was nothing she could do to change that. But a certified visitor from the Amputee Coalition helped change her mindset and gave her a fresh perspective — she thought, "Well, if you can do it, then so can I."

And it wasn't long until Beth was back to doing the things in life she enjoyed most with some modifications. She loves to bike with her husband on her Berkel-Bike Pro, which is a combination of a handbike and recumbent trike driven by arm and leg power. She also enjoys "sit skiing" where the skier sits in a moulded bucket seat with their body "literally folded in half." Beth is also an avid swimmer and fulfilled a life-long dream when she attended mermaid camp in Weeki Wachee, Florida, where she was the first amputee and the first mermaid with an ostomy!

Second Chance

Beth readily admits that she's incredibly grateful for her second chance at life but openly shares the challenges of managing her ostomy. "If a fairy godmother came down and said I could get rid of one of my medical issues, the ostomy is the one I would

choose because it just makes me anxious. As much as I prepare in advance, there are always circumstances that may arise that are out of my control." And how does Beth deal with a new circumstance like the excruciating shoulder pain she has recently been experiencing? "I cried, ate some popcorn, and watched some crappy TV. I woke up the next morning and figured out what I needed to do and then worked backwards to outline the steps I needed to take to get there."

When asked what advice Beth would share with new ostomates, her response was quick, "There IS life after ostomy surgery. You need to take care of your body, pay attention to your stoma, and if there is a problem, take care of it right away. And most importantly, if you want to try something, go ahead and try it. You can do it!" 🌈