

Patrice Stankey

Choosing to Live Courageously, with Determination Midst Suffering and Change



Challenge of a Lifetime

As one moves into the years of one's later fifties, a person expects some changes and decisions to present themselves as the aging process moves forward. Yet, these times seem distant as one looks ahead to a life into the eighties and nineties in current life expectancy. However, Pat Stankey faced some drastic changes in 1999 before she was sixty. Knee pain set her life on an unexpected course of medical treatments and disabilities.

To meet Pat, over four years later, was to meet a person who encouraged others with a smile and a peaceful patience that kept the world around her a pleasant place to experience. Her story is typical of our many quiet, unsung and unknown heroes who provide the faith and determination that support our world on its positive course and hopeful future. Reflection on her story is an encouragement to discover in our own lives those who give us a basic hope in life's ultimate meaning and to take time to thank them for being those beacons of light around us.



Those Ordinary Years

Patrice Allen was born in La Crosse, Wisconsin, at St. Ann's Hospital on April 7, 1940. She was one of seven children, five girls and two boys. Of these early years, Pat recalled what a gift it was for her that her mother was a homemaker who was always there when she arrived home from school. Pat only came to appreciate this as a senior in high school when her mother worked outside the home. "I remember," Pat said, "the absence I felt on coming home from school as a senior when my mother was not there." Pat recalled that she grew up in a home where faith in God was of great importance. "My mother always said," she remembered, "That if you keep God's commandments you will be okay."

Pat's school years were spent at St. James the Less School and Aquinas High School in La Crosse where all of her teachers were sisters, members of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. Here she was supported in the faith she received from home. After high school she went to work

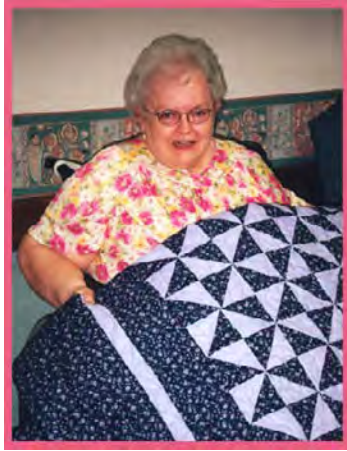
and continued her education with some courses at Western Technical College. Her employment was in the business field with her first job at Tillman Brothers Furniture Store as a cashier.

It was at Tillman Brothers that she met her future husband Al Stankey. They were married in June 1962 and became the parents of two sons, Jim and John. Following in the footsteps of her mother, Pat quit work to care for her children until the youngest was eight years old and the two boys could go to Grandma Stankey's home after school. Pat then resumed her career at Exchange State Bank in La Crosse until the bank was sold. After some time with Olsten Temporary Service, she again was employed in banking services with M & I Bank of La Crosse where she continued as an employee on long-term disability.

Years of Discovery and Medical Treatment

This road to life in a nursing home began in 1999 when severe knee pain led to a diagnosis of arthritis and required surgery for a knee replacement. During recuperation at Bethany Riverside nursing facility, back pain made walking difficult and was viewed as part of

the recuperation. After two weeks Pat was discharged home where the back pain increased to become so severe that she could no longer walk. Via ambulance Pat returned to the hospital for further testing to determine the cause of a low blood count. With no conclusive results from medical tests, she was again transferred to Bethany Riverside where she could get the assistance needed for daily routines.



Medical improvement seemed out of reach while pain continued to be a problem. A small growth on the hip was eventually discovered and through the encouragement of her son, John, an LPN, Pat returned once again to the hospital for further examination and testing which resulted in a diagnosis of **non-Hodgkin's lymphoma** with a recommendation for chemotherapy. So, from expectation of six months or so recuperation from knee surgery, Pat was faced with a life threatening disease and was told she had a fifty-fifty chance of survival.

Continued pain led to further x-rays and the discovery of a broken femur bone. In the process of treatment for this, broken bone cancer in the leg was found. Deterioration of the bone necessitated the insertion of a metal rod to replace part of the leg bone. In the healing process from this surgery, infection in the wound set in which required further treatment and hospitalization. Pat's life now was divided between hospital stays and residence in the nursing home. Her sciatic nerve was dead, walking was no longer possible, and, as treatment for infection went on, more assistive care was needed. These were not easy days

as she struggled with depression and discouragement and relied on the support and encouragement of her husband and family as well as pastoral care staff.

When Is Enough, Enough?

Bethany Riverside became Pat's home away from home as she resigned herself to the fact that return to her own home was possible only for brief visits. Pat was determined to make a meaningful life for herself and others as she became involved in a variety of activities offered. She was always present at exercise time, music and entertainment programs, as well as prayer services offered in the chapel. She did what she could for herself, calling staff only when needed, and pursued her favorite hobbies — such as the craft of cross stitch. These helped her to retain the smile and calm she shared as gift to others both staff and other residents.

She had survived cancer and chemo, and she and Al were able to celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary in June 2002 at a local restaurant with family and friends — including the much-loved five grandchildren. They both recall, "We had a lot of fun."

With hospitalizations behind her, it seemed that life was taking on

a pattern by November 2002. Suddenly, pain in her leg and hip was once again becoming a problem; examination showed that a screw from the metal rod in her leg was projecting, was causing the discomfort, and needed to be removed. As she left for the hospital in early December, Pat was anticipating a short stay of a couple of days. Once again she needed to adjust her hopes, as infection was a continual problem and required two weeks of treatment in the hospital. What a joy it was then to return to her Bethany Riverside home midst friends and activities she enjoyed.

This contentment did not last long as the infection returned and required further attention. Once again Pat was to hear news that was frightening and called for life adjustments. The infection was in the leg bone and the only recourse was amputation of the left leg.

Recuperation after this surgery did not go quickly or easily. After a brief return to the nursing home, she learned that the infection needed aggressive treatment in the hospital. With dismay and fighting discouragement, Pat returned to the hospital for another 14-day stay. Home again after those two weeks, she was still adjusting to the loss of a part of her



body and she said, "Sometimes I sit and cry and feel overwhelmed at this loss of part of me. I have gone through phantom pain. Sometimes I want to know where it is and it bothers me not knowing."

Pat adjusted to some lack of freedom of movement as she was kept in her room a good share of the day due to antibiotic IV treatment and a suction pump to clear the infection. Meals in the dining room and trips to the beauty parlor gave her some daily outlets and time to remain in touch with others.

Positive Philosophy

Through years of facing a variety of crises and monumental adjustments in life, Pat was asked about her ability to maintain a positive and healthy outlook. She responded, "When faced with these trials and difficulties in the last four years, I decided I had two choices. I could choose to be down in the dumps or I could choose to be cheerful. And I chose to be cheerful."

This choice to be cheerful was reflected in Pat's ability to tell the story of her four year old grand-

daughter, Avie, who was curious about her grandmother losing her leg. Pat told of a conversation with Avie on the phone when her granddaughter asked, "Grandma, is your leg gone?" and when Pat replied, "yes," Avie's response was, in the curiosity of a four year old, "Did they use a small knife or a big knife." With Pat's answer, "A big one," her wondering was satisfied with, "Okay."

This good humor and friendly relationship with others was evident also when another resident came by to reclaim her favorite Beanie dog which was on loan to Pat to cheer her during the latest surgery recuperation. This trust and faith in the goodness of life and in other people flowed out from this person who had taken suffering and hardship as a challenge and won.

Kathy Wallace, Recreation Therapist, voiced the experience of many at Bethany Riverside who

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came to know Pat. "I have always been impressed by Pat's love of people and being with them. This has seemed to be a strong motivation in her recoveries from health challenges. Pat had a strong presence at programs. She added fun and energy to those she attended, and she was missed by many residents when her attendance was limited."

Pat continued to be an inspiration to choosing the positive until her death, at age 69, on May 21, 2009. In this way, she was a powerful source of hope and possibility to others throughout her life.