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SEPTIC SHOCK SURVIVOR | Hope builds as she battles back



TAMMY LJUNGBLAD | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

During therapy at The Rehabilitation Institute of Kansas City, Bernadine Pickering did sit-ups to strengthen her abdominal muscles, which she must rely on more since losing her hands and feet to septic shock.

Limbs gone, but not optimism

Infection that made woman a quadruple amputee has taught her to put true loss in better perspective.

By ERIC ADLER
The Kansas City Star

As much as some Americans have lost in recent years – jobs, homes, savings – few can lay claim to what has befallen 27-year-old Bernadine Pickering.

At age 12, she watched the 100-mile-per-hour winds of Hurricane Marilyn toss fishing boats and luxury yachts onto the beach of St. Thomas like heaps of toys. It shredded her native island, leaving 10,000 people homeless.

“It was a doozy!” she said.

Two years later, she watched her mother – poor, raising three young children after fleeing to the U.S. – fight off breast cancer.

Then, 10 months ago, Pickering’s chest and throat began to burn. Heartburn, suggested a doctor. Then she found a rash. She felt dizzy. She got to the emergency room at Truman Medical Center and, within hours, her organs failed. She was placed on life support and fell into a coma.

“Mama, mama. Wake up, mama,” her daughter, Ananda, then 3, whispered at her bedside. “Why isn’t

mama waking up?”

Pickering emerged six weeks later from septic shock – the bacterial blood infection that annually kills 180,000 to 250,000 in the U.S. – the Kansas Citian’s extremities black with gangrene.

A surgeon took both feet at the ankles, both arms at mid-forearm.

Despite all that would follow – losses heaped upon losses, dark thoughts on black days – Pickering would discover that, even as a quadruple amputee she was not alone. But also that sometimes life’s greatest blessings are the ones that too often go overlooked.

She lost her job as a hospital secretary. She has virtually no money and lives in cramped federal housing with six family members. She feared no one ever would find her attractive again. Yet ...

“Isn’t this a beautiful day?” Pickering chimed on a sunny fall morning.

Her eyes glowed, her smile stretched wide. Standing 5 feet 11 inches tall, with short, curly red hair and a taste for hoop earrings, she once used her arms and legs to play basketball and volleyball. At Kansas City’s Northeast High School, she twirled a rifle on the Junior ROTC drill team.

She maneuvered to get out of the passenger seat of the old Buick that her longtime boyfriend, Cortez Johnson – Ananda’s father – borrowed to drive her to



“I thought I had nothing but time.

I still think I have time.

I just know my time is more precious now.”

BERNADINE PICKERING

PICKERING: Uncommon disabilities, but uncommon optimism

The Rehabilitation Institute, near 31st Street and Baltimore Avenue.

"Come on, mamma," said Ananda, now 4.

"I'm coming. I'm coming," Pickering said, laughing.

Her left prosthetic hand is a metal clasp tong signaled by her muscles. Her right is an electronic hand that opens and closes at the thumb. Her feet have been replaced with hard-plastic tubes that pull over her shins and up to her knees like a pair of brown riding boots fitted with white sneakers.

For 63 years, the institute's therapists have helped victims of some of the most difficult strokes and neurological disorders, amputations, accidents and other difficulties regain their movements – and their lives. Multiple amputations from wars or car accidents can be found in hospitals, but quadruple amputees who survived septic shock are rare.

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Researchers worldwide, including at the University of Kansas, are trying to battle septic shock.

Victims typically fight off the violent infection and emerge relatively unscathed, or they die. Middle grounds are uncommon – and often tragic.

In 2008, the septic shock of Brazilian model Mariana Bridi da Costa captured international headlines. The brunette, who had twice won fourth place in Brazil's Miss World pageant, entered the hospital in December with what was misdiagnosed as kidney stones. She developed a urinary tract infection. The bacteria coursed through her blood, erupting into septic shock. She lost her hands and feet and, in January 2009, died just short of her 21st birthday.

"More people die each year from severe sepsis and septic shock than from lung cancer, colon cancer and breast cancer combined," said Mitchell Levy, a leading expert and chief of the division of pulmonary and critical care medicine at Rhode Island's Brown University Medical School. "It is a surprisingly common illness that people



With her prosthetic hand, Bernadine Pickering held stems of clover that were given to her by her daughter, Ananda, 4.

don't know about."

In the worst case, the death rate reaches 60 percent.

"Lots of time, if you come in (to the emergency room) septic, you can go downhill real fast," said Emanuel River, who researches sepsis at Detroit's Henry Ford Hospital. "I have seen people die in six hours."

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Pickering's story is novel, not only because she survived, but also because she has company at the institute. Twice a week, her intense therapy sessions overlap with that of another young mother.

Heather Cagle, 30, of Overland Park entered an area hospital last November.

At her lawyer's advice, she declined to be photographed for this story or to identify the specific infection that led to her hospitalization. But while at the hospital, she developed a form of septic shock and fell into a coma.

Like Pickering, she lived and left the hospital a quadruple amputee – left leg gone above the knee, right leg gone

below. Fingers of both hands were cut off below the second knuckle.

"I have little bitty stumps," she said.

Cagle lost more than that. The mother of a 5-year-old son, her troubled marriage dissolved as she lay sick.

"I lost my fingers. I lost my legs. I lost my husband. I lost my home and my neighbors," Cagle said. "I was basically feeling like life was over ... sinking into a hole.

"I had to make a choice. I was either going to live in that hole and live there the rest of my life, or crawl out of that hole."

Amputees experience the usual range of emotions – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and, finally, acceptance.

"We do know that the resilience of the human spirit is incredible," said Pamela Forducey, a Oklahoma City rehabilitation psychologist who has worked with amputees for 20 years. "We can overcome things that are unimaginable. Attitude has everything to do with it."

What is remarkable, say psychologists, is not just that Cagle and Pickering have uncommon disabilities, but that they share such uncommon optimism.

Having lost so much, the women said, has taught them to put true loss in better perspective.

Pickering: "When I meet people who say, 'Oh, I lost my house,' or 'Oh, I lost my job,' or 'Oh, my world is falling apart,' I say, 'But you still have your family and people who love you.'"

She looks to Ananda.

"I know," Pickering said, "that somewhere there is a mother who is not here to see her daughter grow. Some mother is never going to see her daughter run across the grass again. Some daughter is never going to have her mom at her high school graduation or first day of kindergarten."

Before her amputations, Cagle said, "I wasn't all that driven. I wasn't happy. I was just coasting. I didn't have as much appreciation for life."

Now, "I don't hardly ever wake up in a bad mood. I get to wake up every

day.”

Every day in the hospital she would stare at a picture of her son, Ryder, for inspiration.

“My little boy is everything to me, my little doodle.”

III

At The Rehabilitation Institute, progress moves in inches, turning a hand, taking a step.

“Are you ready?” asked Shannon Lepper, a physical therapist, as Pickering lay on a padded table. Lepper fixed a harness to Pickering’s waist.

“One, two, three. Up.”

The task this morning simply was to sustain balance in walking. Pickering’s gait is slow, exhausting, with the weight and pressure of a 180-pound body directed onto the stumps pressed into the sneakers at the bottom of her prosthesis.

The day before was the first time Pickering’s mother, Judith Charleswell, had seen her daughter walk without her walker.

Charleswell – who as a child worked the sugar cane fields of the British Virgin Islands and came to Missouri to follow her older daughter in the military – watched as Pickering took one slow, tentative step. Then another, and more.

“My daughter is going to walk again,” she said, barely audible and wiping her eyes.

This day Ananda walked beside Pickering, reaching to hold her right prosthetic hand.

One step ... two steps ... 11 steps ... 28

Pickering breathed heavily.

“It feels like I have five pounds around my ankles, and I’ve been walking all day.”

Charleswell rolled a wheelchair behind in case a rest was needed. It was. Pickering sat.

Lepper measured: 50 feet.

Weeks ago, taking a single step was painful, frustrating.

Even now, Pickering has days of despair. Staring into the mirror after surgery, Pickering would look at her shortened body and judge herself “a freak.”

Not to her boyfriend

III

When Pickering was in her coma, Johnson showed up every day.

“You’re strong,” he told her. “You’re going to pull through. I’m not going anywhere.”

At one point, when Pickering was on life support and might die, doctors warned Charleswell that she might soon need “to make a decision” – whether to take her child off the ventilator.

Later, Charleswell said, her daughter once threw that up to her, saying she wished her mother had let her die.

“I said, ‘Do you want me to regret that decision?... It’s a privilege to be alive.’”

Pickering knows it, although it is hard not to recount some of what she misses: brushing her daughter’s hair and the feel of holding her hand.

“In the morning, the feel of a cold floor,” she mused. “Squishing your toes into a rug, getting a pedicure, wrapping your feet into a blanket.”

Some hardships have only gotten harder.

Before her illness, Pickering took home about \$1,400 a month as a secretary, while Johnson became recently unemployed. Disability pays her \$989 a month. The federal apartment is free. But after paying \$464 a month in Cobra insurance payments, \$300 in utilities, \$60 for Internet, \$40 for cable and \$80 for her phone, she has less than \$50 a month left for food and all else.

She lives with her mother, daughter, Johnson and a younger sister who has two young children. With money sent from other family members, joined with her sister’s food stamps, they just get by. Soon Ananda will receive about \$400 a month in Social Security benefits that will help.

Johnson does what he must. He has sold his plasma.

Recently he kissed Pickering and Ananda goodbye, having volunteered for a six-week experimental drug trial; it may pay between \$3,400 and \$4,000.

The therapists at The Rehabilitation Institute insist that, in time, Pickering will be able to do much of what she once did.

“They say you may not see it right now, but you will go back to running

and jogging. You will be able to ride a bike,” Pickering said.

Hope comes with each small accomplishment – holding a fork or knife, clasping a Cheerio or grape without crushing it. Already, she can do the dishes, fold clothes, do laundry, take the stairs on her rump and, with an Amazon Kindle, read the romance novels she loves.

For now, much else rests with Johnson – “a lamb,” Pickering’s mother called him.

“He gets up every morning at seven and he puts on her three layers of stockings. He puts on the food; he takes her to the commode; he puts the pink tray on her lap with toothpaste; he dips the toothbrush in the water and gives it to her. It drops, he is patient. He gives it to her again. He dresses her; he takes her to the mirror and combs her hair.”

At times, out of frustration, Pickering can snap at Johnson if, for example, he does not put her therapeutic leggings on just right, Charleswell said.

“Sometimes, when she gets angry, I have to say, ‘Bernadine, he loves you. He’s dedicated to you. He is a good man.’”

Johnson simply calls her “the strongest woman I know.”

He tells of strangers who walk up at McDonald’s and Wal-Mart and ask to hug her. Once, crossing a street in a wheelchair, she joked, throwing up her arms and shouting, “Look, mom, no hands!”

“I think they see her as an inspiration,” Johnson said.

Across the rehab floor, Cagle laughed as she walked laps of her own. Pickering got ready to stand again.

“I tell people, ‘Hug your children and love your spouse,’” Pickering said. “Take the extra hour out of the day you think you don’t have to spend with your child.’ Because life, as easy as it comes, can go. I was young, healthy. I thought I had nothing but time. I still think I have time. I just know my time is more precious now.”

Then with a bit of help – “One, two, three” – Pickering was up and walking forward.

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