

A Survivor's Love Story



By John Holmes, Environmental Health Director, Putnam County Health Department

Dedicated to Marianne

I walked into the Key West Women Infants and Children (WIC) office with tears running down my cheeks. “Marianne is not coming,” I told my friend. I was trying to explain while holding back the sobs which were tearing at my heart. “I just talked to her on the phone; she decided not to come. We planned this for almost two years. Now it is completely over. She asked me to ship her belongings back to her. The worst part is she has asked I not contact her anymore!”

Marianne is the love of my life. We met at Rochester Institute of Technology in New York where we lived in the same campus building. My wife left me shortly after school started. Marianne was dealing with a failing marriage of her own. It all started innocently. I would see her outside reading or just relaxing under a tree after work. We would talk casually about school and our past. Marianne is Dutch. She lived in the United States for almost 30 years. We talked about places we had both visited. Time with Marianne made the grueling class schedule almost bearable. We walked from

campus housing to the health center following streets and a shortcut through the woods directly behind the campus.

Almost imperceptibly, we moved emotionally closer. Neither of us knew what was happening. We started holding hands and would say goodbye with a hug. Marianne was invited to an awards banquet; she asked me to accompany her. It was a cool misty evening outside the Eastman House in Rochester that night. We sat through the ceremony which was followed by a dinner with music and dancing. We were enjoying the evening and decided to step outside for some fresh air. The mist had changed to a light drizzle so we decided to sit near a grape arbor -- an overhead trellis on which grape vines grow. We sat next to each other to stay warm. Mellowed on wine we found ourselves in a romantic atmosphere. I turned to Marianne, looking into her kaleidoscope eyes and said, "I love you." She looked at me and replied, "ik houd van jou," which is Dutch for I love you. My heart was beating in my throat and my head was pounding. I then said to Marianne, "I want us to be together forever." Marianne replied, "I have felt the same way for quite awhile."

Our love continued to grow and soon we decided to get married. There were many difficulties to overcome, but it was inevitable we would be together.

I was in a state of shock as I was sitting in the chair in the WIC office trembling with a chill. My mind was disconnected from my body. My thoughts were only of Marianne. *Now what would I do?* My friend tried to console me, but I was too devastated to comprehend what had just happened. I contacted my supervisor and explained that I was not feeling well and needed to go home for the rest of the day.

At home, I felt empty. I sat in disbelief at my situation. Slowly I collected Marianne's personal belongings for shipment. It took several days to complete what should have taken a few hours. Each item held a memory. I was packing and shipping my love and dreams. It was the most difficult task I had ever done. As my dreams were being weighed and tagged for shipment, I decided that I was not going to fall to pieces. I was going to lose myself in my work. I was going to work so hard that I would not have time to think about Marianne. I did not know that my future would bring the most difficult time of my life. In my pain of losing Marianne, I could not have comprehended there would be a time in my near future when I would have a brush with the Angel of Death.

Work became my obsession. Double-duty workloads did not give me the peace I craved. The harder I tried, the more troubled I became. It did not make sense -- the way Marianne ended our plans. I just could not accept it. I thought that if I could work myself to exhaustion, I could at least escape her when I slept. Sleep was fitful. I created a business so I would have additional work to fill my nights and weekends and give me extra money to help solve my growing financial crisis.

My financial crisis began when I was in my forties with a family and had injured my back. I decided that the only way I would be able to support my family was to earn a college degree. I had over-estimated what my market value would be when I graduated. This led me to believe that I would be able to repay my massive student loans. My debt load upon graduation was beyond my ability to pay. I hoped the additional income from the side business would solve my problems. First, it would distract me from the painful

end of my relationship with Marianne and, second, it would help pay-off my debts. After several months, it was obvious that my debt coupled with the high cost of living in The Keys was unmanageable. I decided to take the most humiliating solution to my financial problems and I filed for bankruptcy. I had become a bankrupt, broken-hearted loser. I guessed by now that maybe Marianne was right. She somehow sensed that I was really a loser and I was beginning to believe it.

Bankruptcy eliminated much of my debt, but not all. I still had to pay back my student loans, yet it did help some. I needed to either get a raise or a promotion. I realized that without one or the other my career would soon be over and I would need to seek other employment.

My opportunity came quickly when my supervisor decided to retire unexpectedly. I was the next senior inspector in the office and I had been through several staff turnovers already. Now was my time to be rewarded for my loyalty and hard work. I felt a buoyancy that helped push my problems to the background. I looked forward to going to work again. I almost smiled again, something I had not done in a long time. I secretly thought to myself: just wait Marianne; you will see that I am not a loser. The day of the interview proved again that, yes, I am a loser. I was now a bankrupt, rejected loser.

I was devastated at this new loss. I realized I had only one avenue to follow -- leave the Keys. I decided to transfer to another health department.

My search did not take long. I was offered a job in a small rural county in the northeast part of the state. I would be promoted and the cost of living was substantially

less. This was the best news I had in many years. I accepted the job and made plans to transfer. I finished all my open cases and left for my new life. I had no idea where I would live or what it would cost. All I cared about was a new beginning.

When I arrived, the first place I went was to a motel to make plans to stay for several weeks until I could find someplace to live. It did not take long. One of my co-workers knew a person who had a place to rent. I checked it out and took it. I finally had a new home.

Time passed quickly and I became a part of the team immediately. I needed some retraining because there are many differences in Environmental Health between the Keys and where I was now working. I learned quickly and settled down to live my new life. Marianne was always with me. I thought about her everyday. Time had dulled the pain, but the memories were still vivid. I did not talk to anyone about her, but I think that sometimes I seemed distracted with something.

A year and a half later, I was driving between inspections with a colleague. I told her I was having a terrible pain in the middle of my back and I needed to stop to walk it off. We stopped and it went away after quite some time. I had an annual physical scheduled in a couple days and made a mental note to tell my doctor about it.

I took the day off for my physical and was there 15 minutes early (I operate on Lombardy time). The receptionist took my information and put me in the exam room where I waited for the doctor. When he arrived, we had the usual discussion and I told him about the pain in my back. He ran an EKG and after examining the results, told me I had experienced a heart attack and needed to have a stress test immediately. I told him

that I did not have time for one right now, but I would have one when I returned from a trip later that week. I had planned to help drive my friend's car to Phoenix and fly back. I was only going to be gone a few days. The doctor said he would not recommend the trip and said it was imperative that I get the test. I relented and agreed to have the test the next day. Again I arrived 15 minutes early, ready to put this all behind me. Besides, I was okay and the doctor was just being overly cautious.

The test went quickly. It was a thallium treadmill test. I had a little trouble completing the treadmill part, but I was just out of shape. The cardiologist returned with the results and told me it indicated a major blockage. He said I should have an angiogram immediately. I told him thanks, but no thanks; I had a trip to go on and would have it done when I returned. He told me that I may not make it back, that the heart attack I experienced would probably be my only warning. The next one would in all likelihood be major if not fatal. Again, I agreed to have the test and it was scheduled for the next day. I completed the test and the results showed that I needed open heart surgery as soon as possible. I was taken from the exam area to an ambulance where I was transferred to a hospital in Jacksonville for surgery the next day. Marianne really had broken my heart.

I awoke with a pipe in my throat! I could not swallow and was in a panic. I wanted the pipe out right now. The nurse told me I needed to calm down and it would be removed as soon as possible. They needed to leave the pipe there so I would continue to breathe in case there was a problem. Eventually, the pipe was removed and I was able to calm down. I was returned to intensive care for recovery. When the doctors decided I

was doing fine, they would return me to the recovery area and finally to my room. I was heavily sedated and not able to comprehend anything, but after several days in intensive care, I figured there was something wrong. I asked questions and realized that all was not right. There was trouble in the operating room, my heart did not start up right away and my abdominal organs were not working properly. My kidneys were not working. In other words, I was slowly dying and nobody knew what to do. I wished I could say goodbye to Marianne. I wanted her to lie next to me so I could hold her as I slipped away. I wanted my last words to be, "I love you." Later that night I awoke in a morphine induced state of disillusionment and self-pity. I turned to buzz the on duty nurse and as I watched the door, suddenly, I envisioned a faceless-dark-hooded figure. I remember wondering if the grim reaper had come to harvest my soul.

After five days, I still was not recovering well enough, so they decided to do a complete CAT scan of my chest and abdomen. It was a cold January night when they took me for the test. I was shivering uncontrollably. They rolled me into the scan room and took so many scans I should have glowed in the dark. I was returned to my room to wait for the results the next day. When my doctor came to my room, he was not alone. He brought an oncologist. He said they had found a large tumor near my kidney and it would need to be removed as soon as I was well enough to withstand the trauma. The doctor said that the tumor was resting on a large artery causing a condition called Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT) which is essentially an accumulation of clots in my leg. This could lead to any number of serious, if not fatal, complications. The one positive fact in

all this gloom was that the tumor was encapsulated which essentially gave me more time, but I could not wait forever.

For whatever reason, I started to recover shortly after the CAT scans and was returned to my room where I remained for an additional 10 days. I continued to improve in most respects, but was having trouble walking. The nurse had me up several times a day walking the halls and finally I was well enough to go home to heal from my heart surgery.

I was recovering at home and trying not to worry about the upcoming surgery. My friend Diane was staying with me as a live-in nurse. She went through the ringer with me. I could not sleep right; would not eat. Nothing tasted like it was worth eating. About three weeks after I was home, I fell ill again and returned to the hospital. It seemed my kidneys were failing again. I do not know what happened, only that I eventually returned home to continue my recovery and try to gain enough strength to have the next surgery. I wondered if Marianne realized just how much I loved her and how badly she broke my heart.

About two months after the bypass surgery I returned to the hospital to have the cancer removed. The tumor was so large it had to be removed from the front. While the surgery was excessively invasive, there were no complications. I started to recover almost immediately and within ten days returned home. I continued my slow recovery. Diane needed to leave to take care of some family business, so a co-worker at the health department said I could stay with him and his wife until I could care for myself. That amounted to three weeks. I was now in my home able to get around, but my recovery

was not progressing well. I did not have the spirit to go on. I wondered if it was all worth it. I just didn't care. I had been through so many heartaches, so many disappointments; now I was a complete physical mess! *Why was I being beat-down so bad?* I could not find a reason to continue or to try to get well.

I took a road trip to visit my parents who lived about 50 miles away. I was not sure I could drive that far, but decided to try. I arrived at my parent's home exhausted from the drive. I went inside, had a drink of water and went to the spare bedroom to take a nap. When I awoke, mom had cooked a meal and was waiting for me. We talked and I told them about how lucky I was to be alive. After the meal, my mother brought me a letter from "an old friend of mine" that had arrived a couple of days earlier. I was stunned to find it was from Marianne! She wrote that she was trying to find me. She wanted to apologize for the way our relationship ended. Marianne enclosed all her contact information so I could find her if I wanted.

The anger rose in my throat. It was blocked by my memories of our love. I wanted to yell at her and hold her tight at the same time. I realized I was stomping around in my parent's home and decided to sit in an effort to calm down. I read the letter repeatedly trying to decipher what she might really be saying. I placed the letter in my pocket until I returned home. I read, re-read, and re-re-read and still could not get it out of my head that there was more-than-what-met-the-eye. That same night I replied to her letter in which I told her about moving and the promotion. I wrote that I was happy with my life. I had a new friend who was French and cared for me. She stayed with me during

my health issues. I went on and on. I wanted Marianne to know that I did not need her anymore. I even signed the letter “sincerely.” The one time in my life when it meant the most, my anger overruled my heart. I sent the letter and that was that.

Two days later I received a phone call. The Caller-ID showed it was Marianne! I let it ring several times and reluctantly answered it. I heard her voice and all my anger melted and turned to tears. I knew that I still loved her as if nothing had ever happened. Marianne apologized for what had happened. She reminded me that her mother was gravely ill at the time she was to come to me and passed away shortly after that. I could hear her softly crying on the phone when she said she never stopped loving me. She expressed that she always believed one day we would be together. As she continued, I realized she never had abandoned me. Marianne had entrusted me with her heart. She never took it back. I asked her to forgive me for doubting her love. We must have talked for hours. When we realized that we had talked long enough, I asked what she wanted to do now. Could we meet somehow? She told me she had just gone through cancer surgery herself and could not travel very far. We decided to meet in Valdosta, Georgia.

A couple of weeks later we met. To see the two of us together one would have been shocked. I could not get out of my truck by myself. Marianne had lost so much weight that I might have missed her on the street. We were about as pathetic as two people could be. Marianne helped me out of my truck. We hugged, we kissed and we knew we would be together for the rest of our lives.

We met in Valdosta a couple more times. My recovery was slowly improving. We were making our plans for our future together. On our last trip we visited San Mateo,

Florida, and looked at a house to purchase. Marianne thought it was ugly until I told her how I envisioned our home. When we went inside she found the house welcoming. I knew we would live there soon. We went back to the motel and decided to make an offer. We moved in three months later.

Although my health problems were not over, I knew everything would be fine. Shortly before we moved into our home, I developed a condition that required a cervical fusion. I had surgery without any problems and felt as if I could have jumped off the operating table and gone home. Marianne was at my side the whole time, and that was all that mattered. Marianne was taking a break from her life to recover also. She was gaining weight and smiling again. I was glad she was able to recover with me.

Guess what? Three months later I had surgery again; I had my gallbladder removed! Fifteen months: four surgeries, two mended hearts.

Now as I walk into the WIC office, tears of joy run down my face as I tell Diane the rest of the story. Marianne and I are happily married. I have been promoted to senior management. Marianne has become an American citizen. Both of us have fully recovered and are cancer free for over five years.

WE AND OUR LOVE HAVE SURVIVE