

‘To me, it was a matter of time before I could walk again. You just have to feel the strength from within.’

# Tammy's Story

**T**n the winter of 1997, psychology studies were keeping University of Wisconsin-Parkside student Tammy Lehrmann hard at work. She had a wonderful boyfriend, a loving and supportive family, and a future as bright as her sunny blond hair.

One day, she got sick. She went to her doctor, complaining of abdominal pains. Initially, the medical experts suspected a reproductive system problem.

It wasn't long before the diagnosis became colon cancer. Tammy Lehrmann was just 21 years old. ►





Doctors could offer no reasons why the healthy-looking student, who didn't smoke or drink, had developed a disease more commonly found among older people. Nor could they guarantee any kind of future, let alone a bright one.

At age 21, Tammy Lehrmann heard what no one of any age wants to hear: a diagnosis of cancer.

"When it hits you," she says, "it hits you like a ton of bricks."

•••

May 1999. Tammy Jagelski is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, with a degree in psychology. She is married to Mark Jagelski, who has proved to be much more than just a nice boyfriend. In many ways, her future looks brighter than ever.

In the roughly two years since her bout with cancer started in February 1997, she earned her college degree, said "I do," successfully battled the killer disease, and learned how to walk again.

She also learned how to live again, in a way that she says is much better than how she did it before.

"I honestly would not trade my experience for anything," the Racine native says softly of her illness and subsequent disability. "I have sort of learned to appreciate life more. I used to be grumpy. I now try to take into account how important little things are and whether it's worth getting mad. I appreciate everything more."

Tammy is a very youthful-looking 23, with sparkling blue eyes and a friendly, easy-going manner. When she walks down the street, it's done in strong strides, with feet clad in sporty track shoes. It's hard to believe that this vibrant young woman has suffered a deadly disease whose treatment robbed her of her mobility.

She doesn't mind talking about the sometimes unpleasant details of her illness or her rehabilitation work. These days, she's thinking more about what to do with her degree or maybe of going back to school for certification as a teacher.

For now, she is an office manager at Ad Quest Promotions in Racine, where an understanding boss is flexible regarding Jagelski's medical check-ups and therapy appointments.

"I figure it's a career," Jagelski says of her long-term job future, "and I can wait to make sure it's something that I really want to do."

### *'A humongous shock'*

She originally began her college studies at UW-Madison but didn't find the big campus a good fit. The switch she made to UW-Parkside proved more to her liking, especially the smaller class sizes.

The move also proved fortuitous in

other ways. Her parents, Jim and Linda Lehrmann of Racine, and brother, Josh, played major roles in helping Tammy endure her health ordeals.

"The support I got from my family was incredible. I was on prayer chains from here to who knows where."

When she learned of the cancer finding, "it was a humongous shock; there was no family history," she says. "I was a very healthy person."

The harsh news plunged the young woman into depression and feelings of self-pity, she says. "But I didn't spend a lot of time on it. It didn't help anything.

"I can look back on it now and view it in a positive light. But at the time, I was terrified. I was scared, I was depressed. It

---

*“I can look back  
on it now and  
view it in a  
positive light.  
But at the time,  
I was terrified.”*

---



was a terrifying thing. I just wanted to get better.”

In March 1997, at St. Mary’s Hospital in Milwaukee, surgeons removed a cantaloupe-sized tumor from her abdomen. Tammy traveled north to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., for radiation treatment and follow-up surgery to remove a “dead” tumor that was discovered during the surgery.

She underwent chemotherapy in Racine to catch any cancer cells still floating in her body.

She praised the care she received at Mayo, where she was a patient uniquely younger than others with the same disease.

“The Mayo experience was good,” she says. “They really gave me hope.”

“I was really lucky in that I didn’t get all that sick,” she says of her reaction to the treatments, which she believes were the most advanced that she could get. “But I lost 90 to 95 percent of my hair, which the doctors had said shouldn’t happen.”

She also suffered bouts of fatigue.

Then she lost her ability to walk.

### *‘I wasn’t going to walk’*

Neuropathy, a disorder of the nervous system that is a rare complication from the chemotherapy, was the culprit. “The doctors couldn’t tell me for sure if I could walk again or not,” she recalls. “They didn’t know what to do with me.”

For Tammy, the neuropathy became the worse part of the entire cancer ordeal. At first, she couldn’t accept it psychologically. It wasn’t until Thanksgiving that she came to terms with it.

“I gave in to the notion that I wasn’t going to walk for a while,” she says, and began to use a wheelchair.

However, she parted ways with her first physical therapist when she heard herself described as “paraplegic.”

“I was so offended that she didn’t think that I was going to walk again,” she says.

Tammy found a different therapist, but she kept the can-do attitude that she



was developing since her ordeal began.

“To me, it was a matter of time before I could walk again,” she says. “I did a lot to try to make myself walk again, but it took a long time.

“I had bad days. You just have to feel the strength from within.”

Her regimen of therapy included thrice-weekly, hour-long aquacise classes, designed for arthritis patients, at Wadewitz Elementary School in Racine. Her instructor, Judy Schumacher, had successfully learned to manage her own arthritis pain, in part from the water

therapy. She teaches the classes for the Racine YWCA.

“When I met Tammy in January 1998, she couldn’t walk,” Schumacher says. “But I felt that I could help her.”

Tammy informed Schumacher that her goal was to be able to walk down

the aisle at Mount Pleasant Lutheran Church for her wedding to Mark Jagelski, a scant four months away.

Schumacher replied, “We may not get you down the aisle, but we’ll get you part-way there.”

Mark had devotedly stuck by Tammy

throughout her illness and subsequent time of disability. “It was very stressful on him,” Tammy said, “but I think it made us a stronger couple.”

Tammy had been out shopping for a wedding dress when one of the store clerks remarked about tailoring the dress to accommodate the bride-to-be’s wheelchair. That’s when she made up her mind that the chair would not be putting in an appearance at the ceremony.

“You have to set little goals like that,” Tammy says. “You really take it for granted when you can walk and do everything for yourself.”

### *‘Almost a miracle’*

Schumacher says that Tammy’s love of swimming, along with her increasingly positive attitude toward life, worked in her favor. “It’s almost a miracle what water can do, physically and psychologically,” she said. “We have a very positive group of people (in the class), almost like a support group.”

Tammy worked herself hard in the aquatics class, Schumacher said, and initially, Tammy’s dad came along to assist her. “She never left a class early, (even though) she would look pretty tired. Then she had to go to school afterward and take (college) classes.

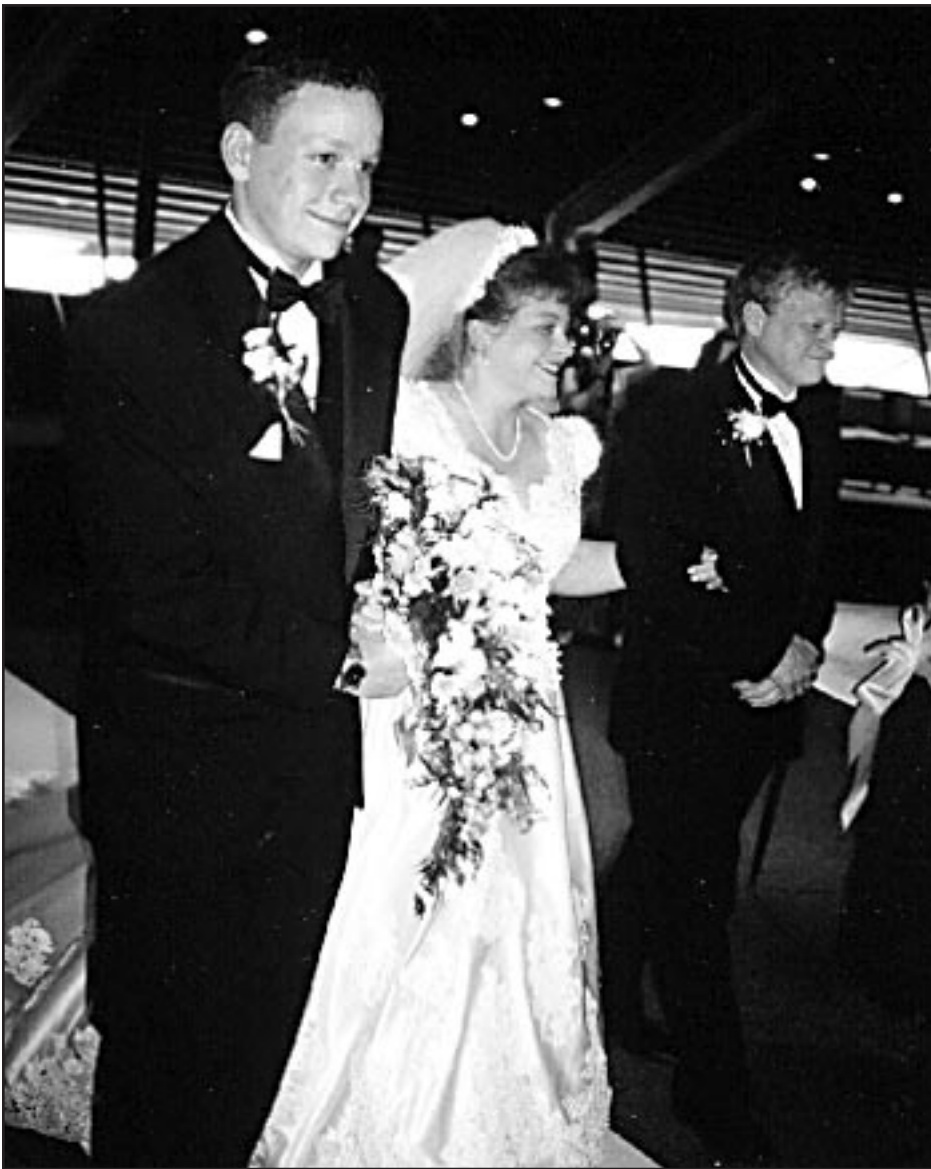
“One day she said, ‘Watch. I can stand up on my legs for just a few seconds.’ For me, that was a breakthrough. It was just for moments, but she’d done it.

“But I never thought she’d get to where she’d be today.”

Tammy also wore boots designed to strengthen her ankles, and would try to slowly make her way alongside walls. Her first step isn’t an event that she remembers. Only that the process to walking again was hard, long and gradual.

“I did a lot to try to make myself walk again, but it took a lot of time.”

In the meantime, she also was working toward completing her degree at UW-Parkside. Her father would bring Tammy and her wheelchair to the campus, and faculty, staff and other



COURTESY TAMMY JAGELSKI

**WEDDING BELLS** — Tammy is helped down the aisle by brother Josh and father Jim at her 1998 wedding.

students helped her make her goal of finishing her education.

“The professors were very accommodating,” she said. “I got a lot of help from other students who offered to take notes for me. Some of my teachers would come in on weekends, so I could take tests. Some professors would tape their classes for me.

“Jack Elmore (a former advising director) would help me with late drops when needed. They were all very helpful. I want to express the gratitude that I feel to everyone who helped me through it.”

Shortly after her graduation in May 1998, Tammy and Mark were married. In a gown not tailored to accommodate

a wheelchair, Tammy walked down the aisle, with the help of her dad and brother.

Her back to the wedding guests, she was oblivious to the sea of emotion that had overwhelmed them.

“I’m not one who cries at weddings,” Schumacher says, “but I cried harder than anybody at this one. Watching her walk down that aisle, that had to be the ultimate.”

### *Ready to go to work*

Tammy also had reached the point where she felt ready to work. The office manager at Schumacher’s business, Ad Quest, happened to be leaving, and the job became Tammy’s.

---

*“I’m not one to cry at weddings, but I cried harder than anybody at this one.”*

---

“I said, ‘Do you want to work for me?’ and it was as simple as that,” Schumacher says. “In all honesty, now she runs the company,” a business involved with advertising promotions and premiums.

The bond between aquacise teacher and student had become one of deep friendship.

“Obviously, I think the world of her,” Schumacher says. “I stand in total awe of what she has done and all the lives she’s touched.”

Others also were impressed with Tammy’s spirit and determination. The members of the aquacise class nominated the new Ms. Jagelski for a Racine YWCA Young Woman of Distinction Award.

When Tammy received the honor in August 1998, she still needed some assistance getting to the podium at the Racine Marriott. But it was obvious that her strength was surging back, especially to the members of the class who watched with beaming faces as Jagelski received her award.

“One in a while she’d grab me for balance, but that didn’t last much longer,” Schumacher said.

### *‘As normal as possible’*

These days, Tammy Jagelski is enjoying her life and adopting mentally healthy attitudes. Her follow-up tests haven’t shown any cancer.

“They’ll never say I’m cured, but to myself I am,” she says. “I try to make my life as normal as possible.”

Travel is a big passion for Tammy, and she and Mark visited Alabama this spring. Her love of the water includes scuba diving, and she’s also a fan of movies.

“I try not to think about future (medical) appointments and I try to control thoughts about remission,” she says. “I take every day that I have; that’s a good day. I’m just trying to make myself as healthy as possible.”

Toward that goal, she tries to eat a healthy balanced diet. And, of course, to walk. A lot.

Tammy said that while she can walk, she can’t run or jump. Schumacher reports that, too, is changing.

“She jumped up and down a couple of times. She ran down a portion of a block. Those were absolute triumphs, and it just keeps on coming.”

What has brought Tammy so far, Schumacher says, is her spirituality and the strong support of her loved ones.

“She couldn’t have had any stronger support from her family or from Mark. They are great people, and Tammy is a product of that. She gives much more than she takes, although she’d never admit it.

“She didn’t embrace life quite as fully as she does now. She literally has faced death, and I think that’s what keeps her so positive. And she continues to find additional things to rejoice about.”

Jagelski’s surgery robbed her of the opportunity to have children. Typically, she isn’t approaching her situation as one of loss, instead considering becoming a foster parent someday.

“I don’t say can’t,” she says firmly. “I say I will.” ■



**STAYING POSITIVE** — “I wouldn’t trade my experience for anything,” Tammy says.

*“She has literally faced death, and I think that’s what keeps her so positive. She continually finds things to rejoice about.”*