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# Inspiring Others

## is a life purpose

(Above) For Cyndi Desjardins, returning to a normal life includes being able to paint the toenails of daughter Cienna.

**P**oised at the side of the pool, Cyndi Desjardins is hesitating. She's been swimming before, but this plunge is different. Testing the water, wading in slowly are no longer options.

As a result of necrotizing fasciitis, or so-called "flesh-eating disease," Desjardins lost both arms below the elbows and both legs below the knees in February 2011. And now, just eight months later, her instructor wants her underwater.

Desjardins has taken a lot of dives during the past year. She's learned so much about what it means to take a risk, to have faith, to just do it.

"I was about to say no," Desjardins writes in her blog, "when I realized through this experience, I have embraced every fearful moment and

jumped in... So I took a deep breath and went underwater..."

It's another accomplishment, another very proud moment in a year of massive change for the Holland Landing 43-year-old.

Desjardins had a dream come true Oct. 18, 2010 with the birth of her son, Liam. She and her husband Marc had spent years dealing with the frustrations and disappointments of infertility. They had adopted daughter Cienna and now had given the six-year-old a much-wanted baby brother, completing the family they envisioned.

It was all perfect. The family blog talked about getting ready for Christmas, show-and-tell at school, and birthday parties.

Then in February, their world turned upside down. Desjardins woke one morning, nauseous, with a high fever

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and severe pain in her thigh. She thought it was the flu and she'd just have to suffer through. As it worsened over the next two days, she realized she was too sick to make it to a doctor's office and called for an ambulance. The next part of the story is a blank. She was put into a five-week medically-induced coma, as a medical team worked to save her life, sacrificing her arms and legs to do so.

"When I woke up, my husband was immediately telling me that I would walk again and we would capture our lives again," Desjardins recalls. It was

the first glimpse of the incredible optimism this family shares.

Marc had had time to do the research, but Cyndi suddenly had a lot to absorb. She spent many weeks in hospital wondering why and how this had happened. "I realized the more you wonder, the worse your day is going to get," she says. "So I have found my own purpose, just as we all do."

That purpose is to inspire others. In just a few months, she has done that in spades. She started a new blog to keep friends and family connected with her progress. The site has had 22,000 hits. Open to news media requests, Desjardins has retold her story again and again, appearing on the front page of the **Toronto Star**, on CTV national news and on Anderson Cooper's nationally syndicated talk show in the U.S.

In each retelling, she is clear that there is no need to feel sorry for her. "My story is one of hope and inspiration.

I wouldn't want it treated any other way," Desjardins cautions.

The couple's research led them to West Park Healthcare Centre in May to be fitted for prosthetics and to begin rehabilitation.

Even at one of the largest adult amputee rehabilitation centres in the country, physiatrist Dr. Michael Devlin admits her case was unique. "First, there are very few quadruple amputees around," he says. "Second, her degree of motivation was up there. And third, she was willing to keep pushing on, even when there were skin breaks. It didn't faze her in the least."

The experts worked through several visions of what her prosthetics would look like. They had to be mindful of the state of her skin after so many grafts.

In just two and a half months at West Park, Cyndi had been fitted with prosthetics and was walking, picking up small objects, and learning new methods to do what she wanted.

"She was ahead of us in a lot of ways," Dr. Devlin says. She experimented with her devices in ways her rehab team hadn't considered. "She painted her daughter's toe nails," he laughs. "Most people wouldn't do that."

Dr. Devlin is also surprised to see how quickly Desjardins started driving. She doesn't have a full licence yet, but insists it will come. "My driving is better than ever," she says, "and, quite frankly, I'm not going to eat a burger behind the wheel."

She is emphatic that she'll be driving her kids to their events, an activity many parents would consider a mundane chore. "It's that sense of appreciation because you can," Desjardins says, of many things that have been taken away.

She heard of a person who does amputee yoga classes and is thinking about trying it out. Becoming an inspirational speaker is among her goals and Desjardins would like to go back to work. Before her illness, she had been employed as a business unit manager at an electrics manufacturer in Toronto.

"I see every day as a new adventure and a day that I wasn't expected to be living," she explains.

Her family joins her in that, sharing in all of her victories. "If I do something as simple as brushing my hair they cheer me on," Desjardins says. "My husband is constantly reinforcing me."

She has inspired everyone around her, including her fellow patients at West Park. "She gives other patients a physical perspective," Dr. Devlin explains. "They think, 'If she can do it, I should too.'" Just like high school, peer pressure is in play.

Her own inspiration comes from others. "My children, my faith, the wonderful support of my husband, family and friends," she says, "and the kindness of others that's just so overwhelming."

That kindness has included fundraising efforts to help pay for home renovations to accommodate

## Excerpts from Cyndi's blog

***Today I passed my written driving exam. One step closer to getting that licence. I think, most would have given up by now, but you know I won't. So I just came in from driving Marc's car. What an incredible feeling it is to be out on the road driving yourself once again.*** – November 11, 2011

***"Socket list" of achievements: Liam and bonding - picking him up, pushing his stroller, dancing with him; Cienna and just being a mom and there for her, speaking to her class, taking her to the park and our girl time; putting on my makeup everyday; swimming laps; living with joy.*** – November 9, 2011

***Things I am thankful for: my faith; my family; my life; every step I make towards building a relationship with my children; and each breath that I take I wasn't supposed to... hope and inspiration surround me in the hearts of beautiful people.*** – October 9, 2011

***This was a week of firsts. Liam had his first fall and so did I. We are learning to walk together and as he stumbles from furniture piece to piece, it was not long ago I was doing the same, in the safe environment of our home.*** – September 19, 2011

***Today I stood on my legs for the first time. It felt like I was standing on my toes. I guess that's how ballerinas feel but it was a wonderful experience and has left me once again overwhelmed.*** – June 14, 2011

Follow Cyndi Desjardins' blog <http://cyndisstory.igloocommunities.com/blogs>



(Above) West Park prosthetist Henry Nizio adjusts Cyndi's prosthetic legs to enable her to walk for the first time in months.

(Below) West Park physiotherapist Stefania Lehkyj guides Cyndi through the rigorous therapy that has enabled her to return home to her family.

Desjardins' new needs. Eventually, it may cover the costs of myoelectric arms that look more like the real thing.

Psychological support and what she describes as the wonderful pastoral care at West Park helped Desjardins to keep looking forward, to focus on what she can do rather than what she can't.

The looking forward included the anticipation of reaching Oct. 18, 2011, Liam's first birthday.

In hospital, Desjardins missed six months of her baby's life. To be absent in an important bonding time between mother and child was very painful. "I dreamed of his first birthday because then I would only have missed half of his life."

She's able to carry little Liam in her arms now, take him for rides in

**"My story is one of hope and inspiration. I wouldn't want it treated any other way."**

her wheelchair, and dance with him. The bonding she missed is coming along.

"I expected it to be immediate," Desjardins admits. "You are home and let's go back to where things were before."

"Before" is becoming less relevant as the family discovers, through Desjardins,

new places they can be "now."

Back in the pool, Desjardins has accomplished the goal of the exercise. She's managed to flip onto her back and swim. Powered by her own body, unencumbered by prosthetics, she's now able to join her daughter who has just learned to swim her first laps. It's a blog-worthy moment: "Now I can swim with her. How exciting is that?! I don't want to stop swimming now. A new spark has been ignited." ■

