

Partnering with a Miracle-working God

In God's Timing, in God's Way

By Sherrie Porterfield

Ema McKinley has real zeal for living. She was known for participating in downhill skiing, martial arts, and even skydiving—while holding down three jobs. But that was before April 1993, when a work accident changed Ema's life.



As an employee of a large retail store in Rochester, MN, Ema and other co-workers were scurrying around to get ready for a visit from a corporate headquarters representative. Alone in a storage loft, Ema was stacking boxes 33 feet up, when she fainted from the heat. She fell and hit her head, losing consciousness. As she fell, her foot caught in some shelving, and she hung upside-down for two-and-a-half hours before someone discovered her.

This trauma to her body caused severe long-lasting injuries. Immediately, Ema lost 60 percent of her hearing. She became wheelchair bound, her spine so twisted she could not even sit upright. Doctors at the Mayo Clinic said her spine would never straighten. And, they predicted, "She will never get out of that wheelchair."

A Heart to Help and Pray

Ema had always had a heart for the disabled, even before she experienced her own traumatic disability. One of her jobs prior to her accident was with the Rochester Park and Rec department in their adaptive recreation program. She says, "The only thing of value when our life on this earth ends is how we helped other people." She believes that her life is about showing the love of Christ and modeling the life of Jesus, who said, "The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him" (John 8:29).

She has also been a strong pray-er on behalf of others and her church. Ema has not been able to attend her home church (Autumn Ridge in Rochester) in recent years because of her heightened sensitivities and pain, but she is still faithful in prayer. This is one way God allows her to remain a part of the church.

She specifically prayed during the church's building project. "I used to come in a van and pray in the parking lot for Autumn Ridge as it was being built," she says. She sat in the driveway and prayed daily for the safety of the workers. She prayed, too, that it would be a place where members of the community would come to know Christ. "I prayed that each nail pounded represented a new soul for God."

Ema regularly prays for the staff as well as for members of the congregation. She prays over each event and person mentioned in the church's weekly publications. Ema listens online to worship services at the church website. She also lays hands on the name of each staff member listed there, praying for them individually, and as a group, for God's direction. When the mail brings greeting cards from the congregation, she prays for those who send them as she opens the envelopes one by one. "Every event, every card that comes to me, I pray over it. It is my honor and privilege to pray. It always has been."

Years of Pain and Exhaustion

Yet the challenges have been great. Not only was Ema wheelchair bound, but she was unable to even lie in bed at night because of her twisted spine. Restorative sleep was rare. Ema would be awake in her wheelchair for 60 to 70 hours at a time, then fall exhausted into sleep for three to four hours, only to repeat the cycle again. But in the midst of her struggles, Ema says, "God [has been] my partner through it all. The bigger the problem, the more my faith grew."

In response to her injury she also developed reflex sympathetic dystrophy (RSD) with symptoms including intense burning pain, skin sensitivity, and swelling. For Ema, the pain was excruciating. Among the sea of drugs she took, Ema was prescribed a daily dose of 2000 mg of morphine in an attempt to manage the pain. Doctors said levels that high should have affected her mind and other organs years ago. Although there have been some side effects, thankfully her mind and organs have been spared.

Ema's only food intake has been liquids and protein drinks, due to problems with her digestive tract. Headaches have been constant. At one point she experienced a leg infection so severe that doctors wanted to amputate her leg. Ema refused. She knew God was in control, not the doctors. She committed the situation to Him, at peace that God would either take her to heaven or heal her leg. Gradually He healed her leg.

Several times Ema came close to death, but each time God brought her through. All of Ema's doctors and caregivers know that she loves God and has a deep faith. Remarkably, Ema has not experienced anger or bitterness. She praises God in spite of it all. "At the end of the day," she says, "my goal is that I put a smile on God's face."

Many times, throughout Ema's suffering, people prayed for her complete healing. The board of elders from her church laid

hands on Ema and prayed for her. People from churches in different states prayed for her healing. Ema continued to thank God for that healing, though she hadn't yet received it.

Ema recalls a specific time when God came to her and said, "Ema, it's going to be OK." In faith, Ema knew that her healing would come, whether it was here on earth, or when ushered into heaven. According to Ema, "If God said it, it was going to happen. Whether people prayed for weeks, months, [or] years, I knew that healing would be in God's own timing." So she persevered in faith and was not disappointed as she waited in her wheelchair.

Her Christmas Miracle

On Christmas Eve 2011, around 1:00 a.m., Ema was alone in her festively decorated townhouse working at her computer. And she was anticipating with joy the next day when her two sons and their families would arrive to celebrate the birthday of the Savior.

Rolling herself across the room, Ema tried to maneuver her wheelchair to reach something. But her chair tipped over. Instantly, with the impact from the fall, searing pain overtook her highly sensitive body. It was almost more than she could bear. There she lay, alone and helpless. She cried out for help but knew it was unlikely anyone would hear her. Her neighbors who shared a wall with her were out of town for the holidays.

For more than eight hours Ema lay crumpled on the floor, screaming in excruciating pain and crying out to God. Though she had been through many difficult experiences in the previous 19 years, this time she thought she was going to die. "I felt that this was the way God was going to take me home," she said. Yet she continued to trust Him.

After hours of lying on her left side (which is the most

affected by RSD), Ema couldn't see her left foot. But suddenly something amazing began to overtake her. "I felt God entering my body," she says. "I felt God straightening out my foot."

Her head was resting on her arm and she had a good view of her hand, which had been clenched for years. "I felt my hand open up. I could see the raw flesh being changed to healed flesh. I thought, *God is in my house!*" Then He began working on her neck and spine. Though her spine had been crooked for 19 years, suddenly Ema flipped over and lay flat on her back on the floor.

Ema watched in wonderment as a bright, white robe appeared. It was Jesus. "He kneeled down on one knee and asked for my hand," she says. "I reached out to Him. Then He took both hands and pulled me up. I knew at that point that God wanted me to walk."

Shaking and crying uncontrollably, Ema stood up straight and began to slowly walk, stumbling with the use of muscles that had not functioned for nearly two decades. "I walked into my bedroom and lay straight down on my bed for the first time in 19 years!" She lay there stunned at what had just happened.

"God did some last testing during those eight hours on the floor," she says. "He saw that I was still deeply committed to Him, so He knew He could trust me with this big miracle. Sometimes God allows us to get to our worst point before He gives us His best."

Her Christmas Surprise

Eager to share her excitement at this incredible evidence of God's healing hand, Ema walked her wheelchair out to the door where her family would enter to celebrate Christmas. She wanted them to see the empty chair when they came in—a certain

surprise!

When her family opened the door later that morning, sure enough, they saw the empty wheelchair and did not know what to think. Then Ema came walking down the hall toward them.

“It was surreal,” says her son Jason. “With just the Christmas lights on, I didn’t know if I was seeing a ghost, or dreaming, or what!”

Needless to say, the family was shocked and thrilled at the sight of their mom and grandma standing up straight and walking. Ema has shocked and delighted all her friends and family as she has met them face to face following her Christmas miracle.

Doctors are amazed. When Ema first saw her physician, Dr. Bell, she surprised him by pushing back the curtains.

“Tell me Ema has a twin!” Dr. Bell exclaimed. “This was not Mayo Clinic,” he says of the restored Ema. “This was an act of God.”

Doctors recommended that Ema receive physical therapy to regain strength and greater ability to make use of her restored body. She has lost weight now that she can be more active, and her strength in long-dormant muscles continues to increase.

God’s Glory Spreads

Once called “the crooked lady in the wheelchair with the broken body,” Ema is now known as “the lady with the Christmas miracle.”

Ema looks forward to seeing how God will use her story. Her story is spreading quickly in her hometown and beyond. She gives all the glory to Him. “It’s all about Him and who He is,

how much He loves His children, and what He can do for them,” she says.

“Why wouldn’t you want to partner up with this miracle-working God? There’s nothing too big for Him!”

SHERRIE PORTERFIELD is a member of Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN, and worked full time on staff in communications. She is now a freelance editor and graphic designer for the church’s monthly *ARC Magazine*, where a version of this article was first published.

Photo caption: Author Sherrie Porterfield remembers Ema as “the crooked lady in the wheelchair” in years past (left photo). Upon arriving at Ema’s home for an interview, Sherrie was delighted to see Ema open the door and greet her—“all 5’ 9” of her, standing straight and tall!” (right photo).

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