MS and Aging

by LEEANNE LAPUM

LeeAnne Reflects on MS and Aging

Occasionally I find my mind revisiting my early years. This is one of those times.

I was young, active and full of life. Fortunately for my parents I was easy to raise. At least, I thought I was.

I ran around with a good crowd, I made good grades, I was never even tempted to smoke, drink or do drugs, and I never got in trouble with the law. That's probably a result of my religious background, which I'm very thankful for.

I'm not what you would call particularly gorgeous. I look okay – nothing to write home about. I was blessed with nice hair, big eyes and a huge smile with great teeth – sounds like I'm describing a horse, doesn't it? I've aged pretty well, if I do say so myself. At least that's what people tell me.

I guess I'm a low maintenance woman as far as hair and makeup go. I can no longer do my hair and makeup thanks to MS. My sweet husband does it for me.

He teaches art at a middle school/high school. His students know about my situation, and the girls in his class gave him instructions on how to do my makeup. Keep in mind that these girls are 16 years old. That alone makes it pretty humorous.

He does a good job. I have learned to resign myself to sitting patiently as I become his canvas.

'Grey hair is the least of my problems'

Thanks to MS chemo treatment I can no longer dye my hair. My scalp is too tender. It's not so bad, though. The way I look at it is very simple. I am in a wheelchair, my husband has to feed me and I use a mobility van to get around. I'm totally dependent on others – grey hair is the least of my problems. If people don't like what they see, they don't have to look.

People's reactions differ as far as how they perceive me. Some are really kind and helpful. Others avoid me as if I were contagious. Some stare at me. I purposely meet their stares with a huge smile and a pleasant word or two. That almost always gets a pleasant response.

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MS Doesn't Stop Whiskers

I love to go outside on a sunny day as long as it isn't too hot. My husband always comments on how nice I look, because he knows he'd better. But he says he can see more "things" in the sunlight, which isn't necessarily a

good thing – especially in public.

He sometimes chooses to look me over when we're in the middle of a bunch of people, and he never hesitates to point out something I didn't have when I was young. For example, my whiskers.

I am postmenopausal. Ladies, you know what that means. If you're not there yet, you will be in time. And my husband points out these unavoidable whiskers.

It wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the fact that he whips out his trusty pocketknife and pulls out the little tweezers. He then manually moves my head around in every direction possible in order to catch just the right light, so my whiskers show very obviously. Keep in mind that he does this in public, usually surrounded by a fairly large crowd people.

In all honesty, I have to admit – not only do I have whiskers on my face but on my upper lip and neck as well. What a sight I must be sitting in my wheelchair and having my head twisted, turned and manipulated while my husband stares at me intently, looking for things that don’t belong. Unfortunately, MS doesn't stop aging or whiskers!

Choose to Be a Survivor

Regardless of your age, you must determine to be a survivor. Take one day at a time, conquer it, and move on to the next. Don't let your situation get the best of you. There is more than likely someone who is in worse shape than you are.

I found all of this to be true during my experiences while undergoing chemotherapy following my mastectomy. Doctors, nurses and patients that I met during treatment couldn't quite figure me out.

My husband and I often found ourselves giggling during treatment over one thing or another. We look at it this way – why allow yourself to bring others down with your attitude and demeanor? It doesn't accomplish anything.

If you ask me, the keys to happily living with MS are:

- Surrounding yourself with upbeat people.
- Making a list of blessings you experience daily.
- Allowing yourself and others to make mistakes.
- Keeping a journal of your experiences, both good and bad.
- Making a conscious effort to find humor in things. It helps you keep a smile on your face and a twinkle in your eyes. People won't be able to help but wonder what you're up to.