

## Living Well seminars help woman reach goal

Sometimes the best prescription for living well is a sense of purpose.

Count Nancy Clarke, a volunteer at Kittitas Valley Community Hospital (KVCH), proof positive.

Flash back 15 years. Clarke and her family arrive in Ellensburg, buy some land and build a home. Clarke, who grew up in New Jersey, says she was drawn to Ellensburg “by the place and by the people.” Years later, that hasn't changed.

But Clarke's life has.

One day not long after settling here Clarke finds that her balance is shot and she can't ride a bicycle. Then comes the time that Clarke, a seasoned horsewoman, climbs into the saddle – and falls off the other side.

“I knew something was wrong,” she says.

And thus began an inescapable journey down a path no one would voluntarily choose.

Sitting with her then-husband in the office of a Seattle neurologist, Clarke got the devastating news. Her diagnosis? MS, or multiple sclerosis, a potentially debilitating disease of the central nervous system with a wide range of possible symptoms that range from muscle weakness, balance issues and paralysis to slurred speech, loss of vision, mood swings and cognitive issues among other problems.

“You discover that you go through a huge grieving process which seems to take forever,” Clarke says. Ultimately, she says, you accept it and move on.

At one point, Clarke was bedridden but experienced a remission and was able walk again using a walker. Five years ago, MS forced her to begin using a motorized wheelchair.

Two years later, her husband divorced her and moved away, weary, she says, of the toll MS was taking on both of their lives.

“I still love him,” she says. “But I don't hate MS. It's part of me.”

For Clarke, other challenges lay ahead. By last year Clarke, who had moved briefly to Wenatchee, was in deep trouble, hooked on the narcotics that had been prescribed over the years for her pain. Her life was out of control.

“I was a total drug addict,” she says now. “I hit rock bottom. I couldn't go any lower.”

Clarke went through an intervention and was involuntarily hospitalized. “The worst day of my life was the first day I was in the hospital. I was scared to death.”

Once released and back in Ellensburg, Clarke found herself searching for direction in her life. One day, she spotted a brochure for Living Well, a program that provides workshops to help people living with chronic medical conditions learn how to improve the quality of their lives.

“It just spoke to me,” Clarke says. She took part in a six-week Living Well workshop series earlier this year.

“There was a lot of reaffirmation of thoughts that had occurred to me but not been solidified in my own mind on how not to focus on the pain. There was advice on how not to get bogged down, stuck in self-pity. They talked about eating right, too, so you feel better.”

But for Clarke, the most important thing came the very first week.

“What they do is set up a personal goal for each person,” Clarke says. “My personal goal was to volunteer six days a week. I felt like I wanted to be part of everything.”

As it happens, meeting her goal would be more difficult than she had ever imagined.

“I thought it would be a piece of cake,” she says with a self-deprecating laugh. “Wrong! I was applying for volunteer jobs in a wheelchair and it seemed like nobody wanted me.”



A number of organizations turned her down. Her frustration grew. So, with the encouragement from Living Well, did her determination.

Clarke kept knocking on doors.

The first door that opened was at KVCH where Clarke has a weekly four hour shift on the hospital's

courtesy desk. Since then, she's added two four hour shifts as a secretary in the respiratory therapy department.

*“My personal goal was to volunteer six days a week. I felt like I wanted to be part of everything.”*

“I'm not through yet,” she says with a confident grin.

In addition to her role at KVCH, she added work as a volunteer coordinator and grant writer at Gallery One. Then came a chance to volunteer as a grant writer for Hope Source. Add in her position as member of the City of Ellensburg's Parks and Recreation Commission and a similar role as a member of Ellensburg's Environmental Commission. Both groups advise the Ellensburg City Council. Finally, Clarke teaches poker one morning a week at the Ellensburg Adult Activity Center.

“I don't feel like my education is being wasted now,” says Clarke, a college graduate who has a master's degree. “Having a written out goal really motivated me.”

The phone at the courtesy desk, where some of the paperwork for her Hope Source work is spread out before her, rings.

“Information desk. Nancy speaking,” she answers, her voice warm, vibrant and welcoming.

When she hangs up, she is smiling.

“The agencies I'm doing work for don't care that I can't get out of bed by myself, bathe myself or dress myself,” says Clarke, who depends on an aide to help her with those functions. “Having a purpose in life is very invigorating.”