



'Courage to Give' author looks to spread message of goodwill, faith

By Cheryl Sherry

Post-Crescent staff writer

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Prior to July 12, 1991, Jackie Waldman thought she had the best life ever.

"I had my own business, a loving husband, three great children ... and was very athletic," said the Dallas woman who suddenly began experiencing numbness from her waist to her toes. July 12, 1991 was the day Walden was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

Now an author and motivational speaker, Waldman will speak at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday at Green Bay's Lambeau Field Atrium. A two-time guest on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and member of Oprah's Angel Network, she is best known for her "Courage to Give" book series. The Green Bay stop is part of a 130-city speaking tour to teach people how to find meaning in life through giving.

"Multiple sclerosis," said Dr. Gizelle Larson, neurologist at Theda Clark Medical Center in Neenah, "is considered the most common, serious disorder of the central nervous system affecting young and middle aged adults. In the United States, 0.1 to 0.2 percent of the population has MS. Its cause is unknown."

Being diagnosed with this incurable disease felt like a death sentence to Waldman. Instead of seeing possibilities, she only saw limitations.

"You may say that's normal, but my problem was, I felt sorry for myself to the extreme for a long time," she said. "I became emotionally numb and all I could do was think about wanting to get my old life back, and how sad I was that it was gone. I didn't really see any hope."

Until she went with a friend to see the movie "Schindler's List."

"I left there grateful for my life and decided my pity party was over," Waldman said. "I knew what I was doing wrong — I wanted my old life back ... but true survival, after watching that movie, isn't survival of our old life, but survival of our spirit and our attitude no matter what."

She began to volunteer at Our Friends' Place, a safe haven for abused girls in Dallas, and to speak with teens at the Dallas Memorial Center for Holocaust Studies.

"Those pay it forwards add up," Waldman said. "I still had MS. I still was tired. But all of a sudden I realized I'm not feeling sorry for myself like I used to. Even though I'm a wounded bird, I can still fly. Now the key was to find out how to fly in a new way. And I was ready to learn."

The movie also inspired Waldman and a friend to organize Random Acts of Kindness Week in Dallas, as part of the National Random Acts of Kindness Month. She also wrote the first "Courage to Give" book in 2000, which told the stories of 30 people who were dealing with physical or emotional trauma but found their lives changed when they started helping others.

A producer from Oprah called Waldman and asked her to be on the show the day after the first book was released. Within 36 hours of the show's airing, more than 7,500 people signed up to volunteer with charities they found using www.volunteermatch.org.

Since then Waldman has written four books about people overcoming adversity, including "Teens with the Courage to Give," "America, September 11: The Courage to Give," "Teachers with the Courage to Give" and her new book, "People with MS with the Courage to Give."

Waldman, who takes Avonex once a week, said she is happier now than ever before.

"Avonex to me is not a cure, but slows the progression of the disease. So it is a shot of hope. It may not cure my MS, but it may at least keep it where it doesn't get any worse and I can be the best I can be when that cure comes around.

"The funny thing is although this was the worst thing that happened to me, it became my most blessed moment."

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If you go

Who: "Courage to Give" author Jackie Waldman

When: 5:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Lambeau Field Atrium, 1265 Lombardi Ave., Green Bay