

# JUST LIKE RIDING A BIKE TURNING ADVERSITY



Rosemarie Rossetti *Photography by Mark Leder*

by Barbara Stahura

# INTO OPPORTUNITY



Imagine this: You heat your oven to 375°, the right temperature to bake a pumpkin pie. Then you sit in a chair next to the oven and pull down the very hot door. Still seated, you lift the pie pan full of liquid ingredients from the counter and then try to slide it onto the appropriate rack, *from the side*, without either burning yourself or sloshing the pie filling all over the place. Not very easy, is it?

Rosemarie Rossetti, who bakes a mean pumpkin pie, has become an expert at such maneuvers, and many others far more complicated. She had to. The beautiful house in Gahanna, Ohio, she shares with her husband, Mark Leder, was not built to accommodate wheelchair users like her. She hasn't seen the second story or the basement since June of 1998, when a 7,000-pound tree fell on her as they were celebrating their third wedding anniversary with a bike ride. Along with other injuries, her lower spinal cord was crushed, leaving her a paraplegic.

Already an accomplished public speaker, teacher, corporate trainer, and writer with three degrees, including a doctorate in agricultural education, Rosemarie believed she would never be able to rebuild her life or her thriving business. For a time, she considered suicide.

A decade later, on a glorious fall day in 2008, she recalled those months of massive depression.

"Everything in my life seemed wasted," she said. "All my education, a Ph.D., all that I had worked for, all the business I had built. What purpose was it now, being in this situa-

tion? So I just kept thinking, I don't want to live like this. I hurt too bad, I can't sleep, and I'm depressed. If this is what life is, no thank you."

Mark, 50, recalls those days, too, when he was his wife's near-constant caregiver.

"Boy, it was difficult," he says. "Nobody trains you for it. The first year or so was really tough."

He ended up taking antidepressants for a time, saying, "I was actually more depressed than she was. But we did relationship counseling for close to a year just to try to understand, because when you get married, you don't expect something like this to happen. Your frame of reference is where things are today, and then all of a sudden that whole notion of your reference gets turned 180°. So you have to reintegrate that from a psychological standpoint."

With patience and invaluable assistance from family and friends, neighbors and colleagues—"I'm forever grateful for those people stepping up," says Mark—their marriage survived and still thrives. But during that first year, Rosemarie nevertheless had to make gigantic adjustments to her new physical reality.

Her turning point came when the Ohio Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services sent her to a motivational seminar a few months after she came home from the rehabilitation center. First of all, she says, seeing how others were managing with their recently acquired disabilities was like group therapy. It ignited a small spark of hope that she could do the same.

Then people at the seminar talked about *Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist who had survived

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several concentration camps during the Holocaust.

“A lot of people found value in it, so they recommended it,” she explains.

She also learned about the Wheel of Life, with its eight components: physical environment, career, money, health, friends and family, significant other/romance, personal growth, and fun and recreation. If components are lacking or nonexistent, one’s life is out of balance.

Using her wheel, Rosemarie was stunned to discover that she no longer had any fun in her life. Before her injury, she was frequently on the go, often with her husband, enjoying activities like rollerblading, biking, dancing, or simply going to dinner or a concert. So she decided she could begin having more fun, even in a wheelchair. If she could not do the same things she had done before, she would find substitutes.

She came home renewed and refreshed, feeling positive for the first time since the accident. She told Mark about Frankl’s book. It turned out he had read it in high school and still had a copy.

“It’s a hard book to read. It just socked me,” she explains. She was deeply moved by Frankl’s assertion that the meaning of life was love.

“So I started thinking about how I love Mark and how it wouldn’t be fair that I end my life,” she recalls. “How could Mark go on if I wasn’t here, and how could I end my life if I loved my mother, who was in her mid-80s at the time? She depends on me. I’m her only daughter. I’m her youngest. I’m the one she counts on as she gets older. She has another child with a disability, and now there are two of us. And I just kept on thinking that if I really loved these people, I’ve got to get through this. I can’t just say that’s it.”

Furthermore, she learned, as Frankl did in the camps, that she could control her attitude, even if she could control little else. She could even accept his belief about suffering: “For what matters above all is the attitude we take toward suffering, the attitude in which we take suffering upon ourselves.”

She realized she hadn’t truly suffered until the 80-foot tree crashed into her life. Now, though, she could find meaning in her pain, as Frankl had in his.

Blessed with her new understanding that life in a wheelchair was still worth living, Rosemarie’s emotional state

improved. Then, as her body continued to heal, she began sleeping better, which also helped lessen her depression, as well as Mark’s. She learned how to get into bed by herself and how to turn over, so her husband no longer had to wake up every few hours to help her. She became able to shower without assistance. She learned how to run the vacuum from her chair. Her feet and ankles were totally paralyzed, but with physical rehabilitation, her quadriceps (the muscles in the front of the thigh) became strong enough to allow her to stand and walk a bit with crutches or a rolling walker, so one day, she was thrilled to be able to stand at her kitchen counter and make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Sure, these tasks took much longer than before, but in a gradual rebuilding of confidence and strength, she was doing them herself.

Rosemarie was reinventing her life.

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## REINVENTION

Three months after her accident, she was back on stage as a public speaker, but not without trepidation. Her friend and colleague Randall Reeder, a fellow member of the National Speakers Association, had landed a speaking engagement while she was in the hospital. He informed her that she would do the talk with him. She balked, wondering how she could possibly do that. But he insisted.

As someone who had taught for years and more recently had delivered many presentations on training and communication skills, Rosemarie was no stranger to the stage. But now she was in a wheelchair only three months post-accident, unable to use her body to stand and move around as she had previously done. On top of that, she was rolling on the same parquet floor in the banquet room where she and her husband had danced the previous New Year’s Eve, having the time of their lives.

The waves of emotion overwhelmed her professional composure. In front of government employees who had come to learn about overcoming their fear of public speaking, she began to cry.

“So I told the audience that this was my first time back since my spinal cord injury, and I’ve got to tell you that this environment brings back memories,” she says. “I need to share this, and I need to get this out. I’m very sad that I’ll never dance again, and here I am today back for the first time, so please understand, because I just can’t go on.”

The audience understood, and although she didn't know it then, so began her move from corporate trainer to inspirational speaker.

Rosemarie, now 55, continued to improve, having made the decision that her life would be as fulfilling as ever. Vocational Rehabilitation Services continued to help her adapt. They made some accommodations in her home so she could function there and work in her home office, helped pay for modifications to a van so she could drive with hand controls, and hired a consultant to help her rebuild her speaking business. Having decided to put more fun into her life, she eventually began investigating ways that she and Mark could return to some of the activities they enjoyed, such as bike riding and skiing. Many adaptive devices had become available to allow people with disabilities to play sports and lead physically active lives, and the couple was determined to take advantage of them. She learned she might be able to bike again with a three-wheeled recumbent bicycle. Her quadriceps were strong enough to allow her to ride with adaptive pedals. After some research and testing, Rosemarie found the right model, and ordered one for each of them.

"Even though the trikes were expensive and really a stretch financially for us," says Mark, who works from home as an Internet programmer, "I think it was absolutely the right thing to do, because Rosemarie was able to keep her legs limbered up"—crucial so muscles don't cramp and atrophy.

In early 2000, a business trip required Rosemarie's presence in Granville, Ohio—the city where she had been injured. She had come far in the last two years, but had not yet dealt with a major demon: revisiting that fateful place and what had happened to her there. So she decided to face it head-on. In her specially equipped van, she drove to the same place where she and Mark had come that day to unload their bikes for a ride along their favorite trail. She parked and wept. Yet on the drive home, an insight came: riding that trail again would help her heal emotionally.

So several months after that business trip, their new recumbent trikes in the van, Rosemarie and Mark drove to Granville, ready to ride the trail, but anxious about reliving what she calls "the worst day of our lives." They ped-

aled to the exact spot.

On that life-altering day, they had been riding side by side, laughing and talking, celebrating three years of marriage. Then, recalls Rosemarie, her husband "hears what he thinks is a gunshot, but it wasn't a gunshot, as we know now. It was the sound of the final snap of the tree. And I remember him saying, 'Look over there. Something's falling!' I remember leaves falling as they do in autumn. And I remember instinct told me to speed up. Then Mark says he yelled, 'Stop!' I don't recall that, but he probably did. And that's when he jumped off his bike, so he didn't get hit. The tree was halfway down, he claims, and the live power lines were following it. So I was totally engulfed by everything and buried under this 7,000-pound tree, 80 feet tall."

Terrified for his wife, Mark began picking gingerly through the branches, thinking she might have been electrocuted by the live wires and fearful he might also be. But when he saw her, curled in the fetal position still on her bike on the ground, "He started using his hands and arms to break through the branches and got all cut up so he could get to me," Rosemarie says. "Then he started rubbing my feet, and that's when I started moaning, so he knew I was alive."

She opened her eyes, seeing double and not understanding why all these people were looking down at her. After a life-flight to a hospital in Columbus, Ohio, she underwent emergency surgery. She spent five days in intensive care and five weeks at Ohio State University's Dodd Hall physical rehabilitation center, and then endured many months of outpatient rehab.

Yet, here they were, two years later, starting down this demon, knowing they had survived and grown stronger. As Rosemarie later wrote in her inspirational column, "Courage is the power to face your adversity. You are far more powerful than your outside circumstance, and once you recognize this, you will gain the courage you need to overcome anything."

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THE COURAGE TO OVERCOME

In the eight years since that day, Rosemarie has acquired an impressive list of sporting accomplishments. She skies on a monoski, which is a seat on one ski; the person sits on the seat with legs in front and steers with two outrigger poles. She plays golf, tennis, and racquetball,

rides horses, swims, and has gone whitewater rafting. The couple took up kayaking, using a tandem kayak, after taking adaptive paddling and safety classes.

Ohio weather permitting, they frequently head outdoors, often taking their trikes as well as the kayak. “That’s one of the things that we do to keep our marriage whole,” says Mark. “We go out one day a week and have fun. It’s really important.”

They also visit the Gahanna YMCA twice a week. While Mark uses the elliptical machine, Rosemarie takes warm-water Pilates classes in the therapeutic pool. Since she began doing this, her once-frequent muscle cramps have eased. At home, she uses weights to strengthen her upper body and walks for short periods of time with a rolling walker to exercise her legs.

And they learned to dance again. They believed her injury had put an end to this favorite activity, for which they had been taking lessons prior to the accident. Then Rosemarie found an ad for a video about wheelchair dancing. With Mark’s enthusiastic agreement, she ordered it. Thrilled to see that dancing might be possible again, they contacted their former dance instructor, Louie. He admitted he hadn’t heard of wheelchair dancing, but agreed to learn about it and then teach them.

During five months of weekly lessons, they created and practiced a new dance routine. They complied with Louie’s request to debut their routine at the studio and were amazed when fifty people came to watch. At the end of their dance, the tearful audience jumped up to applaud.

Rosemarie also has other, more public accomplishments on her résumé. She carried the torch for the 2002 Winter Olympics in Columbus, Ohio, nominated for the honor by a client impressed with her tenacity. In 2004, competing against six other contestants, she was named Ms.

Wheelchair Ohio. During the competition, she offered her philosophy of life this way: “We need to face challenges, and take action to improve our situation. Adversity is followed by opportunity which leads to personal growth.” In 2007, she was selected as a national “roll model” for a New York City fashion show for a spinal-cord injury fundraiser sponsored by Discovery Through Design. As she said in a news release for the event, “Today, I live an active life with inactive feet.”

Just as before her injury, Rosemarie is still a member of the National Speakers Association. After her first post-accident speaking engagement with Reeder, she continued to speak about overcoming challenges. One of her most popular programs is “Just Like Riding a Bike: Coping with

Change and Dealing with Adversity.” For nine years, she has traveled the country to deliver this talk to audiences of up to 10,000 people of all ages and abilities. A strong believer in using humor to get through difficult times, she also presents a program titled “Humor Lessons for Winning the Game of Life.” And having worked with health care professionals as a patient, she developed a program for them, titled “Make a Difference! Motivational Strategies to Empower Patients for Life.”

She also writes columns and articles on living with a disability, and has self-published her book of inspirational articles, *Take Back Your Life! Regaining Your Footing After Life Throws You a Curve*.

## HOME SWEET UDLL

However, she has put her inspirational speaking and writing career mostly on hold, as she and Mark devote themselves to a project that has become their life mission: building the Universal Design Living Laboratory. Originally, this was simply to be their residence; but then, with a suggestion from their Mastermind group, it morphed into a national demonstration home, where architects, interior designers, builders, and others could learn about universal design and green building to benefit many people with and without disabilities. The UDLL has so far garnered 100-plus corporate sponsors attracted to such a positive, forward-looking project. Once it is constructed near Columbus, Ohio, it will be open for public tours for the first month and then by appointment after the couple moves in.

Unlike typical homes, one with UD “benefits the widest range of people in the widest range of situations without special or separate design,” says Rosemarie. “It is human-centered, accommodating people of all sizes, ages, and abilities.”

This is important for an aging population and also as people experience accidents and illnesses that prevent them from being comfortable in the sanctuary of a “usual” home. Furthermore, incorporating UD from the start raises a home’s appeal and value for future owners, and makes it more sustainable, since anyone could live there without having to make large-scale changes.

Some UD elements are a step-free entrance; hallways and doorways wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair; curbless, roll-in showers; large bathrooms and tubs with plenty of decorative grab bars; and adjustable hanging rods and shelves in closets.

One of the most frustrating areas in a typical home for a wheelchair user is the kitchen. Rosemarie, 4’ 2” in her chair,



**Rendering of the Universal Design Living Laboratory kitchen, featuring a side-hinged oven plus a stovetop and sink with openings underneath (like a desk) to accommodate a wheelchair.**

*Rendering by Brian Pickard  
Architect: Patrick Manley*

cannot comfortably use most of the counters or the stovetop in their present home. But if they were lowered to her height, Mark, at 6' 4", would find them difficult to use. In the UDLL, counter heights will vary. In addition, the UDLL kitchen will have a side-hinged oven, like a microwave, and the stovetop and all sinks will have openings underneath, like a desk, so Rosemarie can use them comfortably and safely.

During the multiyear planning process, they have become experts in universal design and green building. Rosemarie frequently writes about these topics and is often quoted in articles written by others. Yet bringing the UDLL into reality has not been easy. The original mortgage company and the first builder folded. The homeowners association at the original site did not want the home located there once they understood about the tours and crowds, necessitating a new site and a redesign. Then the nationwide financial crisis hit, which delayed the construction from its 2008 start date.

Nevertheless, the couple long ago developed strong patience and persistence muscles, so they continue to exercise them with the UDLL project. They look forward to living in this house where,

for example, doors need not be removed to allow Rosemarie access to the bathroom and where she can maneuver through the barrier-free house with ease.

While waiting for their new house to be built is not quite as easy as (pumpkin) pie, given their determination to overcome huge adversity, their fighting spirit will carry them through this time too.

*For more information, see [www.rosemariespeaks.com](http://www.rosemariespeaks.com) and [www.udll.com](http://www.udll.com).*

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## *Rosemarie Rossetti's Five Lessons to Live By*

- Do something new every day.
- Focus on a hopeful future, not self-pity.
- Believe the impossible just might be possible.
- Allow more time to get things done and be patient with yourself.
- To lower your stress, lower your expectations of other people.

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