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Bride's heart overcomes injuries to hands and feet

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By **Lori Lyons, The Times-Picayune**



BRETT DUKE / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE Merlyna Adams line dances with her wedding party during the reception at The Jefferson Orleans South in Metairie Saturday, April 16, 2011.

Like any other bride-to-be, **Merlyna Adams** worried about the usual things leading up to her wedding to longtime love, Tory Valentine.

She had to decide on a date and a hall. She had to choose bridesmaids, find the perfect shade of purple for their dresses, decide on flowers and music.

But unlike most other brides, Adams had another important decision to make: which set of prosthetic hands would she wear? Upon which silicone finger did she want Valentine to place her wedding ring?

There are the "passives," the immovable set she wears most days. They're prettier, she says, and she sends them to a local salon, which has promised her free manicures for life. Then there are the newer, heavier myoelectric hands, which use tiny electrodes and her arm muscles to open and close, enabling her to grasp a bouquet or a Champagne glass for a



toast. But she's still getting used to those -- and just might crush that glass if she's not careful.

However, Adams is adept at adapting.

Nearly three years ago, her hands and feet had to be amputated because of complications after treatment for a kidney stone.

But with grace, hope, dignity

and the unwavering love and devotion of a steadfast fiancé, the veteran educator last year achieved her first goal: returning to her job as principal at **St. Rose Elementary School** in **St. Charles Parish**.

On Saturday, the 45-year-old Adams achieved her second: She walked down the aisle to marry the man of her dreams.

The most difficult part, Adams said, was keeping Valentine in the dark about the strapless ivory gown she planned to wear with long opera gloves.

Valentine was brought to tears when, at long last, he saw his bride make her way to him.

"The gown was

incredible," he said. "She fooled me on that one, it brought tears to my eyes, she was so beautiful."

Few eyes were dry as they followed Adams, the woman miraculously walking, her glide giving little hint to the hurdles she overcame to make the journey to the altar.



Painful stitch in her side

"I remember hearing somebody say once, 'You want to make God laugh? Plan something,'" Adams said recently.

Adams, who has spent more than 20 years in education, was planning on another great school year in August of 2007 when she first felt the painful stitch in her side. When the discomfort got worse, she went to her doctor, who diagnosed a kidney stone.

But there was nothing routine about it. The 10-millimeter stone caused a blockage, which allowed infection to back into her bladder then spread to the rest of her body. She went into septic shock, which caused her body to systematically shut down.



Transferred from one hospital to another -- four in all -- myriad complications followed: heart failure, renal failure, respiratory failure and, finally, necrosis, which caused the tissue in her hands and feet to die. Despite heroic efforts over several months in 2008 to save them, all four limbs had to be amputated, one by one.

"I didn't know anybody who had a prosthetic," Adams

said. "A hand, a leg or anything. So, having to deal with four amputations at one time, it was like, 'What is this going to be like? What is my life going to be like? But the comfort came in knowing that my family was there to support me. And him (Valentine), saying 'I'm with you. We're going to be just fine.'"

Valentine, the man she had met at a Valentine's Day party in 2006, was by her side every day.

Yes, they did spot each other across a crowded room, Valentine said.

"I saw her," Valentine said. "She was very attractive. Very beautiful. But what I liked about her was, she was very approachable. We just had a lot of things in common."

"He was different," said Adams, who was divorced with a nearly grown daughter. "I just said to myself, something is real different about him. We could talk about things from the very beginning. And a big part of that was how faithful he was."

Valentine said it was that spiritual faith that got him through the tough times that were to come.

'No guarantees'

He was on the job as a warehouse manager in Baton Rouge when he got the emergency call that August day and dropped everything to get to Adams' side. During the next several days, Adams was transferred to several hospitals, eventually ending up at Ochsner in Jefferson, where she spent nearly three weeks in intensive care, fighting for her life.

"By the time we got to Ochsner, she had just deteriorated," Valentine said. "The worst moment was when we got to that last hospital. When (the doctor) came out and talked to us and told us she had been about 30 minutes from dying and we didn't know which way this was going to go. And he could give us no guarantees. I was just devastated. To think that you can go from an

illness, going in the hospital that morning to almost dying that very same day. That was just unbelievable."

But never, Valentine said, did he consider leaving Adams' side.

"I've been raised the right way," he said. "I was raised in the church. Faith is the main structure of our family, and we knew our prayers would be answered. Once we got through those first 48 (hours), I just knew it was going to be all right."

But Adams' condition still was far from all right.



BRETT DUKE / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE Rob Dodson, a certified prosthetist orthotist with Advanced Arm Dynamics, makes adjustments to Merlyna Adams' myoelectric prosthesis at her home in LaPlace Tuesday, March 29, 2011.

As the blood drained away from her exterior limbs, the tissue slowly began to die. Doctors did what they could. But her hands had to be amputated at the forearm; her legs below the knee.

Despite the odds, Adams, the youngest of three children, set in her mind that she would return to her career and a life as close to the one she had before the illness.

"She kept working for it," said Rose Mathieu, Adams' mother. "There was no doubt in my mind" that she would accomplish that goal.

That Adams survived the infection is a medical marvel. That she resumed her demanding career is nearly unheard of, said Carol Sorrels, the national director of marketing and communications for Advanced Arm Dynamics, which provides Adams with her prosthetic limbs.

"To be missing all four limbs is so catastrophic that most people just do well to stay at home and get by," Sorrels said. "It's such a huge thing, just the amount of energy it takes to use hands and legs that aren't yours. It's so unique that she is a principal and a leader and in charge of a school with 650 students. It's just mind-boggling. It's very, very rare. And it's because of her amazing attitude."

Besides Valentine, Adams credits the support of her family and friends with keeping her



positive.

"She has never said, 'Why me?'" Valentine said. "When you get a second chance at life, you just want to live life. We don't take anything for granted."

New routines

Valentine has since quit his warehouse job to be Adams' full-time caretaker and the primary homemaker. They give themselves an extra two hours in the morning to get ready for

their day. That's so Valentine can dress Adams, carefully apply her makeup and style her hair.

"We had some mishaps," Adams said. "The first two or three weeks I talked him through each part. This is the eye liner. This is the eye shadow. He hadn't even seen some of these things he had to use, much less put them on me. The first day I'm like, 'Oh, way too much blush. I look like a clown. Take some off.'"

"The thing is, we both never get frustrated. And, the person I was before -- the perfectionist that wanted it just this way and my hair that way and this jewelry -- now I'm just, put whatever you want."

Valentine drives Adams to her school in St. Rose, where she is, simply, "Mrs. Adams," who oversees the more than 600 students in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade and 100 staff members.

"It's amazing that many of the kids don't have a clue that I have no hands," Adams said. "They'll call me over and say, 'Can you tie my shoe?' or 'Can you open my milk?' And I'm like, 'I can't, but I'll get someone over to help you.' And, every now and then they'll say, 'But why?' And I'll say, 'Well. I have special hands.' And, if they're ready for it and they're asking questions, I'll tell them. That's why I love



children. They are inquisitive and will ask. Adults will stare. And that makes you more uncomfortable than the child who asks, 'Can I see that?' or 'Why don't they move?'"

During working hours, Adams is often left to fend for herself as she goes through the day, learning new ways to do everything she did before.

"It's fend for yourself and do it out of necessity," she said. "But if anything does come up, I have a very capable staff there falling over themselves to help me."

With this ring ...

Valentine said he was ready for marriage in 2008. Adams was not.

"I wasn't going to marry until I could walk," Adams said. "I was in a wheelchair. I had just had my legs amputated and one hand."

Adams said returning to her job and walking to meet Valentine at the altar were two of her biggest motivators.



"I wanted to get back to the children, which I love. But I also want to keep this promise I made him," she said.

And in November of last year, over a quiet dinner, Valentine opened a little box and slipped a sparkling diamond ring on the silicone finger of Adams' left prosthetic hand. "Whether I can feel it on the hand or not, and whether, when I take the ring off I take the hand off too, I still

know it's mine," Adams said. "I still know what it means."

"That's her hand," Valentine said. "She is just a miracle walking."

And it is that attitude that got them to their wedding day on Saturday in front of many of their family and closest friends.

"Nothing keeps me awake at night because I've learned to deal with (the fact that) I can't plan how everything is going to go," Adams said. "I worry about typically what any bride worries about: Are things going to go as planned? Did we forget anything? But nothing related to the disabilities. And to me, that's an exciting thing."

By 5:45 p.m. on Saturday, they were pronounced husband and wife. And by 6 p.m., Merlyna Valentine and her wedding party of 10 had taken to the floor with shades on to line dance to "The Wobble." And while she laughed, encouraged by the chants of "Go, 'Lyna, go 'Lyna!"

Tory Valentine was content to stand back and watch. Earlier, he and his bride had danced slow and easy to a ballad.

"This is a culmination of an undying love," he said between congratulatory hugs and kisses. "God brought us here."



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