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# Living a life of GRATITUDE

Heather (Cochrane) Meadows' heart is full of joy this Thanksgiving for the life she lives as a wife, mother and nurse. Her road to success was interrupted by tragedy, but has led her to inspire countless others. She is pictured with a photo of her late brother, Jon Cochrane, and a family portrait by Francine's Photography.

CHRISTY WHEELAND/  
COWETA AMERICAN

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Ask Heather (Cochrane) Meadows what she is most thankful for this Thanksgiving season, and she does not hesitate with her response - her husband, her children and the opportunity to be on her feet caring for others.

After all, there was a time in her life when she thought none of those things would be possible.

A neonatal intensive care nurse at The Children's Hospital at Saint Francis in Tulsa, Meadows knows first hand what it is like to endure medical difficulties. Nearly 25 years ago, she suffered unimaginable injuries in a motorcycle accident that claimed the life of her brother, Jon Cochrane.

Her story of survival and turning a negative into a positive is one that truly inspires those she comes into contact with.

It's a story that began on April

27, 1988.

Jon, 9, and Heather, 7, had traveled down old Porter Road by motorcycle to a friend's house. On their way back home, they followed a truck that was stirring up dirt on the dusty road.

"Jon couldn't see and I remember turning my head. We didn't have helmets or goggles on to block the dirt," Meadows recalled. "I remember turning my head and Jon had weaved over into the other lane where we hit a truck head-on."

Jon was killed on impact. He was thrown off the bike onto the opposite side of the road. Heather hit her brother from behind, slitting her descending aorta.

Heather was thrown into the ditch near the truck. When the bike went under the truck, it caught on fire, catching the ditch where she was lying on fire as well.

"I remember the guy driving

See **GRATITUDE**, 5



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**GRATITUDE, from 1**

the truck pulling me out and I remember feeling my face was hot. But I don't remember my body on fire," Meadows said. "He rolled me in a blanket (he had) in his truck."

By this time, someone had gone to the Cochrane home to get the children's mom, Susan. When she arrived at the scene, she saw that Jon didn't make it. She knew there was no time to spare and boarded Lifelight to be with her daughter.

Meadows said she vaguely remembers telling her mom she wanted to go home. Nothing connected in her mind that her body had been injured as badly as it was.

"When I first saw my skin in the burn unit, I wasn't anticipating what I saw. But by then I knew I was really hurt," she admitted. "My skin looked like hamburger meat and it was hard to imagine it would get any better."

**A Story of Survival**

Some 87 percent of Heather's body suffered 3rd degree burns. She also suffered a severe heart injury that required six hours of surgery to repair.

Because of the burns, doctors had to go in from her shoulder and saw out two ribs to enter her chest from behind.

The next day she developed a blood clot in her leg from the open heart surgery. If the clot remained, she would lose her leg. If they took it out, it could possibly kill her.

Knowing all that Heather had already endured from the accident, doctors chose to save her leg.

"It didn't make sense that he risked taking the clot out. A surgeon is trained to save lives. It

would have been so practical for him to say she can live without a leg," she admitted. "But it's just one more thing that I didn't have to deal with as a kid. Could you have imagined all the other issues I had to deal with?"

"In becoming a medical professional, that's why we pray when people go into the hospital. We pray for the doctors, nurses and every person who gives care to be prompted by the Holy Spirit to do what they need to do," she noted. "I know it was God's intervention that I was able to keep my right leg."

Heather was in the hospital for three months. She was told she would never walk due to the lack of nerve activity in her legs and spine.

Yet with the help of therapists, she proved the medical community wrong.

"It was not fun. I had tank time. My skin ripped all the time, but my physical therapists were great!" she exclaimed. "There would be surgeries throughout physical therapy. When they measured degree of motion, I knew when I reached those goals another surgery was coming."

In all, Meadows has endured more than 100 surgical procedures as a result of the accident.

"My parents (Mike and Susan Cochrane) never gave in – not physically. They know I had to be pushed. They challenged me to stretch," Meadows said.

"A lot of people see the end product that everything worked out. But they weren't at my house when I cried out. I asked why I didn't die and my brother did. I still don't understand what have I done with my life that Jon couldn't do with his," she continued. "That's where my trust comes in. It's just faith in God to



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HEATHER MEADOWS

Six months after her motorcycle accident, Heather (Cochrane) Meadows works with physical therapists Jeff Hammontree and Cathy Mitchell to regain strength and motion.

know where we are at and God has a plan for us. We will never make sense of it."

**The Mental Challenges**

Meadows admits it was hard growing up knowing her body would never look the same again.

In the Fall of 1988 she went back to school at Porter Public School. She started out going for half a day on Fridays before stretching it out into a full day. When she was in the 3rd grade, she began attending classes all week.

"Second grade was terrible. I was ridiculed a lot," she recalled.

When she transferred to Coweta Public School in the 8th grade, the mental challenges continued.

"In the 9th grade I got into National Junior Honor Society and we went to the zoo," Meadows explained. "One of the boys called me handicapped on that trip. Just when I felt like that chapter was closed, it wasn't. I was just an easy target for negative attention."

"Kids are going to be made fun of. It was just easy to make fun of me because I had scars and looked different."

Meadows admits there were times when she simply felt cheated.

"I wanted to go to a mall and I couldn't shop for a dress. I didn't have the liberty like my friends," she recalled. "I didn't think I would be loved like I wanted to be. I wanted a boyfriend to go out with my friends."

She remembers doing a lot of group activities, and never felt left out. She was very much accepted, and experienced "incredible friendships" that kept her afloat.

It was in school where she struck up a friendship with her future husband, Brandon Meadows. They started dating her junior year (he was a senior) and after she graduated in 1999 they

were married.

Their marriage has been blessed with the addition of four children, Brooklyn, Jaron, Caden and Gavin – yet another miracle.

**Back to the Present**

Nearly 25 years later, Meadows said she still cannot verbalize some of the names she was called during her childhood. Words were hurtful and she was labeled by some in a negative way.

Because of what she experienced through ridicule, Meadows now goes into schools and shares her story with children who are the same age she was when the accident occurred.

"Michele Lee (teacher at Central Elementary) opened that door for me. During the first week of school she talks to her students about character development," she explained. "She has them draw a person who looks different from the others, and asks if that person were in their class, how would they treat her?"

"This has been such a great outlet and a fantastic opportunity. I really hope it makes a difference," Meadows continued. "I know kids are going to be kids. But I really hope if they feel compelled to say something ugly about a new student or someone without legs and want to stare at them, something will trigger their memory about me coming to class and talking about how awkward that feels."

She uses the book "Little Quack's New Friend" and clips from "Beauty and the Beast" to talk about when people look different.

Meadows has also shared her message of survival, hope and faith with women's groups.

"It is on my heart to share with them to not be labeled by their past," she said. "I share with them to come out from beneath the label. Some were abused as children, some abused drugs



First time out of bed – six weeks after the accident.

and alcohol and others had been in prison. The challenge is to not live beneath that label but to come out and seek what God has in store for your life."

She believes character produces hope and perseverance produces character.

"I wouldn't have had as much character if I hadn't gone through what I did," she admits. "God uses everything – all the physical pain, the painful memories. He has used my insecurities and built me up from the inside out."

**Giving Back**

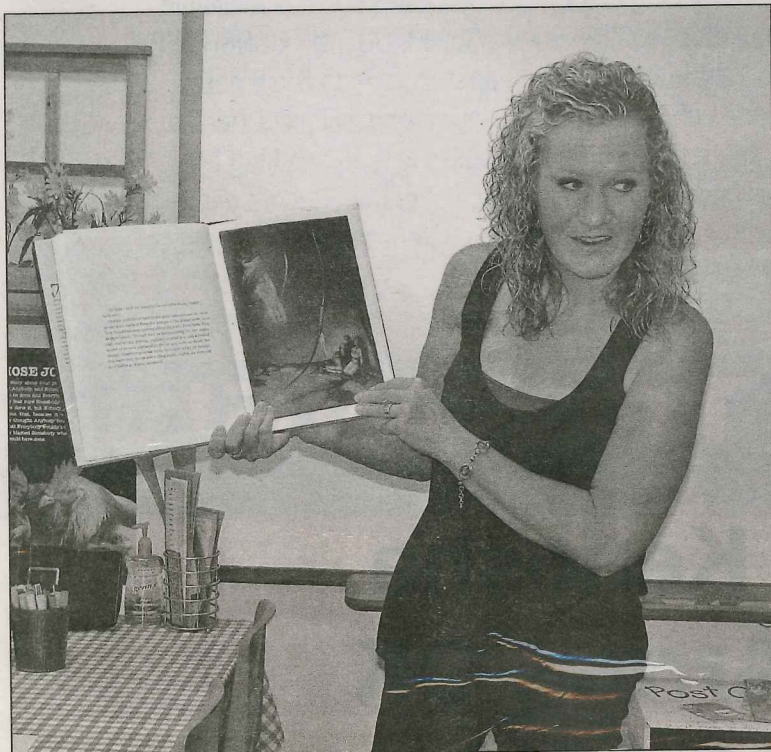
With a thankful heart for the compassion and care she received through her medical trials, Meadows now enjoys making a difference in the lives of others through her nursing career.

"It is an honor to carry the physical story of God's miraculous healing power," she assured. "My belief and faith prevented me from developing bitterness or self-pity. In any despair, if we cry out to God and turn to Him, He truly will fulfill His purpose for us."

Meadows said she sees the reality of that promise each day as she walks in the privilege of her role as a wife, mom and now in nursing.

"It's not just a job, it's a ministry," she admitted. "It's asking for the anointing of God to flow through me to physically touch people and couple that anointing with faith, knowledge and skill to see people healed."

"I am blessed because I have truly seen the hand of God at work in my life, directing my affairs for His divine purpose," Meadows concluded. "He directed my life 24 years ago in a small hospital room and He continues His work now. He will carry it on to completion."



CHRISTY WHEELAND/COWETA AMERICAN

Heather (Cochrane) Meadows uses a storybook to illustrate to children how a person's beauty comes from within and not from outward appearances.