

A Life-Changing Moment



Deborah Hart has faced numerous health problems after being bitten by a spider in July 2012. She says being able to wear shoes again is a triumph.

Bills accrue after a spider bite, but the community steps up to help one of its own

By Jeanie Senior

Twelve months ago, a poisonous spider bit Deborah Hart on the heel while she picked cherries from a tree in front of her house.

Since then, she has wrestled with a life-threatening infection, had a toe amputated, spent her savings because she has been unable to work and worried about losing her home.

She has watched her medical bills pile up—and gained an even deeper appreciation for her community.

“When I moved here in 1984, I knew it was where I wanted to live,” says Deborah.

She recalls her first drive north on U.S. Highway 97 at sunrise, when she saw a rosy glow on Mount Adams “and felt the lifting of an unbearable burden,” she says. “I have not had occasion to change my mind. This is a wonderful place.”

Considering how the community has rallied to help her, “it is hard to find words to explain how wonderful people are,” she says.

She didn’t see the spider that bit her on the heel, but she knew immediately it was something bad because of the pain. The best guess is the spider was either a brown recluse or a hobo. The brown recluse is not indigenous to Klickitat County, but spiders are notorious for hitchhiking into new areas via building materials or produce.

Deborah is deathly allergic to bee stings, and says if there is going to be an adverse reaction to a drug, she usually has it.

A few hours after the bite, there was a black spot the size of a dime on her heel, and her entire foot was hot and swollen.

“I was not hungry, which is a sure sign of near death for me,” jokes Deborah.

Following a night filled with nightmares, she woke up feeling awful, with a hugely swollen foot. Because she didn’t have health insurance, she drove to a clinic in The Dalles that charges on a sliding scale. The doctor sent her to the hospital.

That was just the beginning of a lengthy ordeal that included daily IV antibiotic infusions—she successfully begged to be treated as an outpatient, to save money—followed by a few months on crutches, during which time the venom migrated to her toes, infecting one toe so badly it had to be amputated in

September. The continuing infection sent her to the hospital for four days.

“Spider bites happen to people all the time,” says Deborah. “It shouldn’t be like this.”

She calls her travails “out of proportion for something that seems pretty silly.”

A wound on her big toe just started healing last month. She is walking with a cane, and still needs to keep her foot up a good deal of the time.

“But I’m back in shoes,” she says. “That’s major.”

Because the spider bit her on a nerve pathway, it is now a waiting game. The nerve damage may or may not heal itself in a year. She uses a stimulation device on her foot that may advance the healing.

“As a pain distraction it’s effective to a point, and it beats nothing,” she says. “It certainly beats pharmaceuticals.”

A member of the Goldendale School Board for 20 years, Deborah has been president of the Washington State School Directors Association. She is involved in community organizations, including Friends of the Library, and is an active member of Christ the King Lutheran Church, where she is the longtime secretary to the church council.

Earlier this year, after considerable effort, Deborah’s friend Betty Long Schlieff persuaded Deborah to let her set up an online GoFundMe account, where people could contribute money to help Deborah save her house from foreclosure. The total quickly surpassed the \$4,500 goal. An old-fashioned cake walk at Christ the King raised additional money.

Deborah asked Betty to close the online site in the spring. Betty, not Deborah, has access to the funds.

Dealing with her mortgage holder has been exasperating, degrading and ludicrous, says Deborah, who was ahead on her mortgage payments when she fell ill. She requested a loan modification and is hoping, after several frustrating months, the situation is about to be resolved.

The support she has received—some from friends, some from people she doesn’t know—continues to humble her. At the cakewalk, “more than one person came up to me, and said, ‘Thank you so much for the opportunity to do something like this.’ I cried a lot. It was absolutely overwhelming. It still is, whenever I think of it.”

When Deborah entered Goldendale City Hall recently to pay



Deborah works on the base of a pine-needle basket. Since being bitten by a spider, she has been unable to work at any of the jobs she held previously.

her water bill, the clerk said the bill was \$12 or \$13. Someone had come in the previous week and put \$50 on Deborah’s account. Pressed for the person’s name, the clerk said she couldn’t remember, and then admitted she had been sworn to secrecy.

As someone who was raised to give service—not to be on the receiving end—Deborah says, “I’m going to have to live a very long time and be very good to make up for this.”

Before the spider bite, Deborah worked as a massage therapist, at a friend’s day care center and at Maryhill Winery. All of those jobs are now on the long list of things she cannot do.

In the meantime, she is writing poetry and trying to do a little art work. She took a class in pine needle basketry in May, and plans to help this summer with Vacation Bible School and with the Friends of the Library book sale.

“Anything I can do right now that doesn’t have a doctor’s appointment attached to it,” she says, referring to the several specialists she is seeing because of ongoing complications from the spider bite.

“It’s a saga, it’s a journey,” she says. “I know that there’s something I’m supposed to be learning from all of this, and it’s probably patience. I’m kind of an all-or-nothing person.”

One thing she knows for sure: “I’ve got some incredible friends.” ■