



EDUCATION WAS OUR ANSWER

BY SHERALYN MITCHELL

My husband's chronic illness was never in our plans. How could I help provide for our family?

Two years after my husband, Ty, and I were married, we learned that he had cystic fibrosis, a genetic disease that affects the respiratory and digestive systems. Ty had exhibited symptoms of cystic fibrosis his entire life but had been misdiagnosed. As we learned what was really behind the problems he had always struggled with, we also found out that many children with cystic fibrosis don't live to adulthood.

However, since Ty was already 22, we hoped for the best.

For approximately the first 10 years of our marriage, the problems Ty faced were minimal. Over time, however, the cystic fibrosis led to decreased lung function and other complications, including diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis.

Then, in 2001, 10 years after Ty's diagnosis, he was laid off at work. About the same time, he caught pneumonia, complicating an already-debilitating disease. He was hospitalized for a week. I had enjoyed being a stay-at-home mom for many years, but those days in the hospital made me realize that my husband's illness would, sooner or later,



prevent him from being able to work. At some point, it would be up to me to provide for our family.

I also realized I was not as prepared for the role of provider as I would have liked to be. As a young adult, I had believed that education was a good thing, but I was mostly looking forward to marrying and having a family. To me, education hadn't seemed an essential part of that plan.

After I met and married Ty, I worked for a couple of years toward a degree in interior design. But when our daughter Savanna was born, I stopped taking classes so

I could care for her. We had another daughter, Victoria, a few years later, and I decided that I'd wait until another season of my life to finish my degree.

But when Ty caught pneumonia and I spent that week in the hospital, I realized that our family faced an uncertain future. I also realized that focusing on education would help me make the most of that future, whatever it held.

When my husband returned home from the hospital, I was shown how to give him antibiotics through an IV. As I cared for him during his recuperation, we counseled together about our future. We discussed my returning to school and possible career paths. Ty was soon able to find another job and return to work, but we continued to talk about educational opportunities for me.

In the course of these discussions, I realized how much I enjoyed caring for Ty—and for people in general. I liked the idea of being able to do that as a job and the possibility of making a difference in people's lives. I felt that nursing would fulfill an important need, that I could find work in that field no matter where we lived, and that nursing skills would always be in demand. With those observations in mind, I decided to enroll in school to become a nurse.

A Season of Challenges

One of the hardest parts of dealing with a chronic illness is that you simply don't know how you're going to feel from day to day, or sometimes even from hour to hour. Ty stays as active as he can, which we believe has prolonged his life, but there's no way to predict his condition. One day he looks great and feels healthy. The next, he's so ill that he's bedridden. Even so, he has persevered in providing for our family.

We decided initially that I would go to school part time in the evenings at a local community college so that I could care for our children during the day and Ty could care for them at night. I took babysitting jobs in our home to bring in some extra income.

This balance of school and jobs worked, but it seemed that it would take forever for me to finish because I was taking only one or two classes per semester. Ty and I considered my enrolling full time, but we weren't sure that was best for our family. He certainly helped with our children and with household chores when he could, but again, we were never sure what he would be able to handle.

Meanwhile, Ty's parents, Bob and Lona, had sold their home in California and were deciding where to live. As we talked to them about our respective situations, Ty and I decided to ask them to come live with us for a while so that I could go to school full time. They agreed.

Blessings of Progress

Having two extra adults in our home helped us tremendously. Bob and Lona were willing to help care for our girls, take them to their activities, prepare meals, and handle other household matters so that I could go to school full time and make steadier, faster progress toward my degree. I knew that even if Ty were having a bad day with his sickness, our girls had two other adults they could go to, and Ty would have someone to help take care of him as well. I will always be grateful for the Christlike service my in-laws offered our family during that period. They lightened many of the burdens we carried.

This new arrangement was a huge blessing, but it took some adjustment on everyone's part. It was particularly hard for me to give up some of the roles and responsibilities I was accustomed to fulfilling as a full-time mom. But I realized that my family needed me to work hard and succeed in school.

Returning to a world of textbooks and tests was more difficult than I had anticipated. I was in my mid-30s when I went back to school, and most of my classmates were in their late teens or early 20s. They seemed to be able to learn things much more quickly than I could, so much so that I was convinced that there were cobwebs in my brain. Sometimes I wondered if I was smart enough to become a nurse.

Ty was my sounding board. He encouraged me and reminded me frequently that he was proud of me. His support helped me move forward and realize that, like my classmates, I had abilities, experiences, and insights to contribute.

I found that it was difficult for me to study at home without getting distracted or interrupted, so my husband, in-laws, and I worked out a schedule that allowed me to study at the library after class. That way, when I was gone, I could concentrate on school; when I was at home, I could focus on my family.

As I moved closer to graduation, Ty and I, along with Bob and Lona, arranged our family's schedule so that I could accept some internships. These gave me valuable experience—and an edge when it came time to apply for jobs.

After five years of school, in December 2006, I graduated with a bachelor's degree in nursing. Graduation gave me a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. I had completed something difficult, and I had set an example for my daughters. Graduation also filled me with immense gratitude for my family members who had supported me and opened the way for me to complete my schooling.

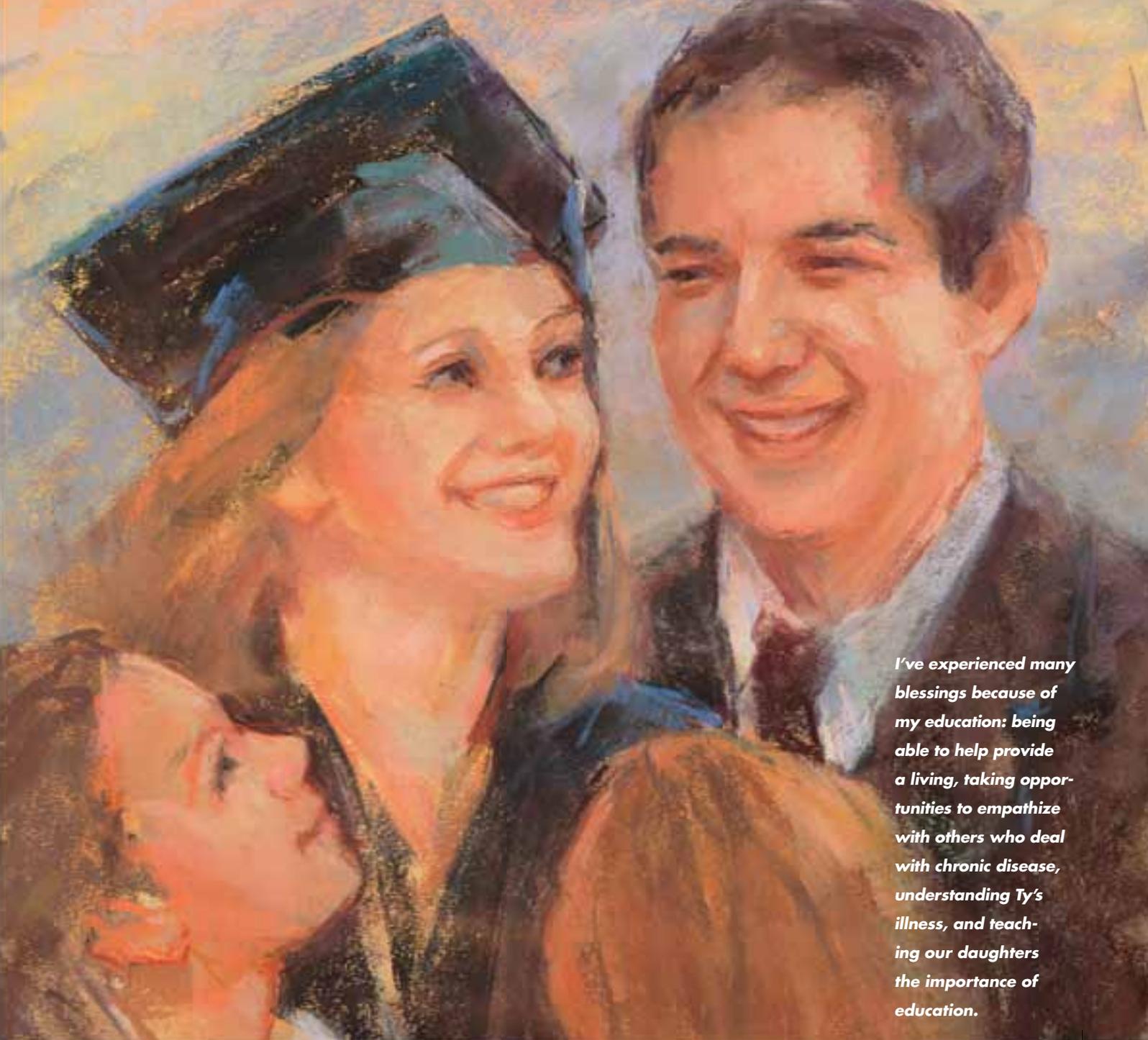
A Rewarding Result

I was hired right away at a children's hospital in Dallas, Texas. It has been a fulfilling place for me to work. I am especially grateful for opportunities I've had to help families who are experiencing the challenges associated with chronic illness like cystic fibrosis and diabetes. I understand the daily challenges they encounter because they are often similar to the ones our family faces.

In addition to being able to empathize with others and help provide for my family, I've received other blessings from my education. For instance, because I work in a healthcare environment, I'm able to easily understand some of the things Ty is going through with his cystic fibrosis. The terminology and treatment options are clearer to me now than they were years ago. Sometimes it's scary to know what I know about this disease, but I realize that my knowledge helps our family make good choices about healthcare and about the time we have together.

Another benefit of our experience is that Ty and I have been able to emphasize to our daughters the importance of education. We are encouraging them to plan for education by considering now what their interests are. Savanna and Victoria have seen up close the sacrifices that so many people made to help me earn my degree. They know—from our own experience and from prophetic counsel—that education is worth difficult sacrifices.

I have told the girls that although I am grateful for the support of a husband and extended family, it would have been better had I taken school seriously when I was younger. We've talked about education being important not only for just-in-case situations but also for *all* situations. Education and family life aren't mutually exclusive. Ty and I are trying to help them understand that the preparation that education provides will help them in *all* aspects of their future lives.



I've experienced many blessings because of my education: being able to help provide a living, taking opportunities to empathize with others who deal with chronic disease, understanding Ty's illness, and teaching our daughters the importance of education.

Peace in the Present and Hope for the Future

When Ty and I got married, we never planned for him to have this chronic disease with its unpredictable symptoms and short life expectancy. We never expected that I would have to someday provide for the family. We didn't anticipate some of the other circumstances that have come into our lives. But they have come anyway.

There are days when we all wish I could be a stay-at-home mom, but that wasn't what was in store for us. Instead of dwelling on what I wish my circumstances were, which only leads to frustration, I try to focus on how blessed I

feel to work in a job that I find rewarding, that offers much variety, that has provided good health insurance for my husband, and that gives our family an element of security. I feel grateful for a husband who has encouraged me in doing something difficult. He, in turn, feels peace in knowing that I'll be able to provide for our girls when he's no longer able to and that we'll be taken care of.

The sense of accomplishment I felt upon graduating has continued in a feeling of perpetual peace and fulfillment. We are grateful that education has prepared us for the future, even when we can't always know what that future holds. ■