

Apprehensive Breaths

Cyndi Mehl overcame a debilitating pulmonary condition to discover the joys of tennis and rediscover herself in the process.

The usually gregarious Cyndi Mehl was uncharacteristically introspective, and clearly nervous, too. Fair enough. It was her debut match in the United States Tennis Association's 2.5 rookie doubles league this past fall and eons away from her first apprehensive breaths on a tennis court in April 2009. It was also a culmination of her courage — and faith — in her on-going battle to overcome a disastrous meeting with a cruel fate some 14 years earlier.

The SurfFlight Playhouse in Beachaven, N.J., a seemingly safe haven if there ever was one, was presenting a Summer Stock Theater production of *Evita*. Mehl, a volunteer costume designer, had logged countless hours of work into an elaborate wedding dress to be worn by the actress playing the Argentine diva, Eva Peron. She was excited and looking forward to seeing how it appeared on stage during the final dress rehearsal on an idyllic Jersey Shore August evening.

A fog dispersing machine, on loan from a playhouse in Southern California, was primed to create the desired ethereal backdrop for the wedding scene. Sitting up close to best critique her work, and in close proximity to the descending fog, she was, ironically, concerned about the climatic haze possibly effecting the delicacy of her dress. As the scene began, she almost immediately began feeling a strange burning sensation in her throat, followed by equally puzzling blurred vision.

As the symptoms seemed to worsen, she retreated backstage with her thoughts shifting from the preservation of the dress to her suddenly not feeling well. Perhaps it was just time to call it a day, she thought. She'd been at her typical daily routine since 5 a.m., and it was now 10 p.m. She assumed she was simply exhausted, arranged a

ride home for her daughter Jennifer, who was in the production, and began the 30 minute drive home.

The ride home became ominous. Still not completely cognizant of the urgency of her situation, which was exacerbated by a searing headache triggered by the oncoming headlights of other vehicles, the trip morphed into an hour-plus ordeal.

Husband, Kurt, a police officer on patrol at the time, had run home after receiving her distressed call. He helped her into bed to get a good night's sleep, which they both thought would do the trick.

But concerns heightened in the morning. Despite her streak of not missing a day of work in 10 years, Kurt insisted his wife call in sick to the orthopedic group where she coordinated surgery. Her symptoms — repeated coughing, shortness of breath, excruciating headache — only intensified as the day wore on.

Even then, it was not fathomable that three bedridden weeks in the hospital would follow, with the worst to come. Oxygen deprivation became a constant, a pulmonary nightmare. Since she could barely talk and breathe simultaneously; a full oxygen face mask became her constant companion. Tests were conducted. More tests were conducted. Multiple medication combinations were tried and re-tried in various configurations by a team of frustrated doctors.

They had been able to connect the dots, but were stymied in that both the fog machine and its paperwork had mysteriously disappeared. Others in the company had experienced similar symptoms, but none nearly as debilitating as Mehl's. As such, their treatment protocol necessitated some educated guesswork, since they didn't have the benefit of analyzing the fog machine's contents.





Although the machine was never located, it was suspected that the mineral oil typically used to create fog was not a pharmaceutical grade as required. And the pneumatic functioning components were believed to be otherwise contaminated by a previous usage. In retrospect, its use, unknowingly, precipitated an inevitable incident of serious airborne toxicity.

Mehl slowly experienced some pulmonary improvement, although she said she spent that first year “at home doing nothing, existing but not living.” Being mostly confined to a wheelchair, with an eventual “graduation” to an electric scooter, would be her lot for the next 10 years. Her prognosis was that any progress she might experience in the 18 or so months immediately after the incident would most likely be the extent of any healing. After that there would be no further expectation of improvement in her condition. Faced with being carried up and downstairs, or worse, Mehl said she suffered a shattering “loss of pride and dignity,” all while maintaining a façade of normalcy as best she could.

Although always vigilant, she is by no means out of the air quality woods today, 14 years later. She is still vulnerable — even outdoors — by any sudden inhalation of gasoline, perfume, bleach, black topping, you name it. But through it all, her improvement, particularly in the last year, has been remarkable. Yet right in the midst of our interview, she experienced a significant episode of airway blockage, right in front of me. A diesel truck’s exhaust briefly wafted by our downwind location, which then required her emergency inhaler. She also carries an EpiPen intramuscular injector, which delivers a dose of epinephrine to buy time to even use the inhaler in the very worst scenarios.

Nonetheless, Mehl’s ever present positive mind set is that as long as she “avoids being in the wrong place at the wrong time” her respiratory function remains mostly on the upper end of her qualified 1–10 scale.

Moving to Punta Gorda more than two years ago has been, as she puts it, a “user friendly blessing.” Her very first time on a tennis court — she would not be dissuaded from trying after watching Kurt enthusiastically embrace the game — was, as you can imagine, approached with extreme caution.

Early on, it was an exercise in stationary, easy-does-it drop-hitting, along with constant reminders to breathe — to inhale before each swing and then exhale while striking the ball every time. And relax. Breath holding and excessive muscle tension, common failings among club players, was not an option for Mehl.

From there it has amazingly evolved into her incredible tennis journey, one that includes full-on running, jumping and aggressive ball striking. Occasionally, we enjoy one of those “I know what you’re thinking moments” by declaring, “It’s a long way from Tipperary!”

Now, completely immersed in playing on two USTA teams in 2011, she recently shared this after winning a league match: “Can you believe I’m really playing tennis! I don’t even think about the consequences of moving anymore. My muscle tone is coming back. My breathing is better than I ever thought it could ever be. And, you know, I’m just now realizing, because of the tennis, how much of me had been kinda buried in my past limitations. I’m having so much fun.” A brief moment later, she turned, beaming, and added, “Oh, and this smile you’re looking at [the Tipperary one] is the real thing.” 