

Jennifer Heck breaks barriers to live her life message

BY RUTH SCHENK | rschenk@secc.org

A few minutes without oxygen set the course for Jennifer Heck's life.

When she could not breathe at birth, oxygen failed to reach the motor centers of her brain. She was diagnosed with mild cerebral palsy when she was 15 months old. Don't call it a tragedy. Heck doesn't. She believes God uses it to show His transforming power.

Walking and talking is a struggle. Skydiving is not. She's done it seven times, learning to listen and trust God more while falling from 15,000 feet.

During this season, Heck chose "Joyous Jumping Jennifer" as her email address as it captures these faith-jumps and deep joy.

She is one of four children. Except for taking her to physical therapy, her parents and siblings never treated her differently. That built determination and grace to break boundaries.

CP affects Heck's gait and speech. Words hang on the tip of a tongue that gets oh-so-tired. It doesn't mean Heck isn't thinking about a million things at once.

"Due to my spastic muscles, it takes me longer with more effort to do everything," Heck explained. "For example, it takes me around 90 minutes to type a page and two-plus hours to prepare and eat a meal."

People often raise their voice when they talk to Heck. She is not deaf. Sometimes they talk "childish" as if she may not understand. That's crazy.

CP does not affect her intelligence. In fact, Heck is brilliant. She is an accomplished author, a scholar who earned a degree in business administration from the University of Louisville and a degree in Bible with special emphasis on disability ministry from Johnson Bible College in Tennessee. She operated her own graphic design business and worked 16 years as a publication designer for Goodwill Industries of Kentucky.

She lives in her own condo and drives everywhere.

Take the time to listen, and you'll find Heck is hilarious. In fact, she laughs at her own jokes and pokes fun at herself. She is patient when people don't understand every word and works hard to help them



PHOTO COURTESY OF JENNIFER HECK

Jennifer Heck, who has cerebral palsy, breaks boundaries with determination and grace.

understand.

She forgives those who are not kind.

Her road has not been easy. She's fought for her place in education, the workplace and even church.

Heck's parents tried to get her mainstreamed through school. It didn't happen until middle school, but at duPont Manual High School, she blasted every boundary,

serving as co-editor of the student newspaper and running for vice-president of her senior class even though it meant she'd have to give a campaign speech in front of 400 classmates. That could make strong legs tremble. Heck did it and won.

Challenges built strong faith. Prayer and writing became her lifeline to God. She knew that she desperately needed a

friend to walk through life with her.

Raised in church, she accepted Jesus when she was 12.

"At 22, I asked Jesus to be my Lord," Heck said. "I'd always known him, but that's when we began a daily relationship."

She's a longtime member of Southeast Christian Church. When the church started The Southeast Outlook newspaper, she was invited to be a guest columnist and wrote 126 columns in addition to articles in magazines and journals.

In the 1990s, she served on a team that started Disabilities Ministry at Southeast. It was a brand new concept in church world at the time. Sunday schools didn't have resources for children with special needs, and churches seemed clueless how to minister to adults with disabilities as well as their families.

"Jennifer was always trying to make the church inclusive," said Mary Tatum, who leads the Shine Ministry at Southeast. "It was not just doors and ramps but an attitude that welcomed everyone. She is a model and advocate for it."

Tatum said much in the ministry changed because of Heck's influence and ideas.

"I'm grateful Jennifer is so generous in grace for all of us who try but get it wrong a lot," she said. "I've never experienced being a person with special needs. I learn from Jennifer. It's been a great honor."

Twenty years ago, Heck attended an evangelism class taught by former Southeast Senior Pastor Dave Stone. He encouraged people to create a mission statement for their lives.

"My mission in life is to break barriers between people and build bridges to God," Heck said. "Everyone needs to know Jesus Christ, grow in their faith and use their God-given gifts for His glory."

She's done that. And more.

Her most recent leap of faith is writing, designing and publishing her first book, "A Heavenly Conversation One Night Before Christmas." It is now in the second edition.

To learn more about Heck, visit www.jjjheck.com.