

For this woman, life isn't business as usual

By Britt Johnsen, bljohnsen@stcloudtimes.com

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WATKINS — At 5 a.m. a quiet neighborhood in Cold Spring is dark as Sandy Hansen slips into her running shoes. When it's too cold for a walk or run to clear her mind, she retreats to the basement treadmill.

She uses her mornings to think about the day ahead, reflect on life, and thank God for all she has, despite all she has lost.

Hansen's husband died of leukemia complications five years ago this month. Sandy and Randy Hansen had been married for just 15 months, a marriage mired in disease. He was diagnosed two years into their relationship — and just two months before they wed.

She hasn't stopped facing challenges since.

The former insurance agent knew little about her husband's feed business, which was struggling through a tough time in the agriculture industry. When Randy died, she was determined to keep it going. So she showed up for work at the feed store in Watkins. Raw with grief but persistent, she kept asking questions until she got answers.

Five years later, business has more than doubled, and customers remain loyal.

Sandy Hansen, now 35, said the business gave her a reason to get up every day. She learned about meaning and faith, and she cemented new friendships.

Her long days distracted her from fully processing her grief. She still wonders aloud what feelings she has yet to face.

But she's unafraid as she walks on. She has faith the road ahead contains answers to her questions.

'One of the best days'

Sandy and Randy's story started as purely as it ended — peacefully and gracefully.

They met while at a Cold Spring bar with mutual friends one evening in May 2000. He immediately paid close attention to her, recalls Sandy's friend Shelly Kalthoff.

"Randy was all about keeping Sandy happy," Kalthoff said. "He was ... a gentleman. She wanted to be treated like a queen, and he treated her like a queen. He took care of her."

They slow-danced later, and at the end of the night, Randy asked her out on a date.

Sandy said she doesn't remember a moment when she realized they would marry. They just made sense together. Sandy grew up on dairy farm near Albany and Randy was raised on a dairy and hog farm near Cold Spring. They each wanted to live a traditional, uncomplicated life: careers in business, frequent family get-togethers and weekends with their friends. Daily breakfast and dinner together. Love, companionship and a shared Christian faith. Perhaps a family of their own one day.

They marked milestones: anniversaries, birthdays, family get-togethers. Soon they began scheduling their weekends together — ballgames, church on Sundays, movies, holidays. Their lives became one.

But their life unraveled as quickly as it solidified.

In August 2002, Randy noticed orange-size bruises on his knees. He played baseball but didn't get hit often. He thought he'd check it out.

It was leukemia, a word that shocked and numbed. A word they Googled the night they found out. A word that gave a life expectancy of three to five years. A word that wrenched rivers of tears from Sandy's soul.

And so began 15 months of hospital visits. From September to October, Randy and Sandy stayed in a Minneapolis hospital. Some days brought happiness and hope; others prompted tears and worries about what was ahead.

A week before their wedding, Randy was released from the hospital.

Like the way they met, their wedding at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Freeport was graceful and smooth. They delegated duties and details to family. It was a tear-filled day shared by 425 family members and friends.

After the joy came the cold reality of Randy's sickness. More treatments. A short remission, but a return of leukemia. He would need a bone-marrow transplant and an extended stay in Minneapolis. Randy and Sandy moved into a small apartment blocks from the hospital.

Then came Christmas Day 2002 — a peaceful day that Sandy calls "one of the best days of my life."

They decided to surprise their families, even though leaving the hospital was not allowed. But they didn't want to be told what to do. Sandy, who had become Randy's full-time caretaker, drove from the Minneapolis hospital to their families' rural Central Minnesota homes. He slept the entire way.

They ate. They opened gifts. They cried.

"People were so happy he was there," she said.

A week later his cancer's complications became too much for his body.

On Jan. 3, 2003, Randy's immune system failed him.

Sandy was struck by loneliness and a sadness that invaded her thoughts. Still, she knew what she had to do.

Inside the peach and tan walls of that hospital room — one bed, one TV, a chair by the window — Randy and Sandy reasoned they were enduring the experience for a greater cause. They vowed to teach others when they got through it, hoping to help them cope with illness, survive tragedy and not take life for granted. "We were trying to fight for his life. ... We were best buddies. We were in it together."

Randy didn't survive to tell his story. But Sandy still wanted to fulfill their mission.

New responsibility

She was granted the daunting responsibility of running Randy's feed business, Ag Venture Feed & Seed Inc. in Watkins. To say she was overwhelmed would be an understatement. She had studied housing development at St. Cloud State University. She knew nothing about accounting or budgeting basics.

She knew nothing about the products Ag Venture sold. She knew nothing of the soybean mill, concentrate, protein and other aspects of animal nutrition. She knew nothing about contracting commodities.

She felt like she had no choice but to take over the business that Randy had owned for more than 10 years. It was struggling financially. Bankruptcy was even an option at one point, but selling it wasn't. So she talked with the employees.

One day in a Watkins cafe she and the employees met to discuss what would come next. She knew some doubted her. She felt out of place, she said during an interview one day at the feed store, wearing a pink Ag Venture shirt with black boots, her blond hair half pulled back, her blue eyes piercing underneath dark eyeliner.

Like many other obstacles, she wasn't going to let skepticism get in the way.

"Let's give this a try," she told employees.

That's when the learning process began — a process she calls a "school of hard knocks." She knew little and her husband left behind little knowledge of policies and procedures. "My husband died with a lot of information," she said.

But when she needed answers, she asked. She never pretended to know something she didn't. Sandy relied on employees and customers to educate her about good financial practices, about their products and about the industry. Those are people who all helped create a successful business.

"I know I can't do it without them," she said.

She has the support of Randy's family, including his mother, Eileen Hansen, and one of his brothers, Rick Hansen. Rick came to work for Sandy about six months after his brother died.

"She just dug right in there," Eileen Hansen said. "She's doing a beautiful job."

Still grieving, there were too many 10-hour days. Days that would distract her from processing the intense pain and sadness she felt as a young widow.

Days where the question would never stop nagging: How am I going to make this work?

Some days she couldn't wait to get home and go to sleep, so she could stop thinking. She rarely committed to activities or social functions. She was just too tired.

There were days that she couldn't stay at work and she would go home to collapse in grief. She felt helpless and foggy. She would stare out a window or clean the house when it didn't need cleaning. "Some days, even giving a minute at a time was all I could do," she said. "... It's a day-to-day survival."

What was important was to appear strong. Don't cry in front of employees or customers. Keep on top of day-to-day operations and the big picture.

Her customers and employees knew how important it was for her to seem rock solid. To appear emotionally weak is to signal a weakness in business.

"You can't let people know when times are tough," said Dennis Landwehr, of Landwehr Dairy, which gets its feed from Ag Venture.

While Sandy assumes some questioned her and whispered about her, many said they never doubted her, and talk fondly of her strength and determination.

"A lot of people would have packed up to sell the business and move on," said Daniel Kohls, district sales manager for supplier Form-A-Feed.

Dan Schlangen and his wife, who run a dairy farm near Eden Valley, admire her intelligence and strength. "I don't know how she didn't break down more," he said. "I just admire her positive attitude, more than anything."

Relationships

It took time and hard work, but Sandy Hansen became knowledgeable about the feed business.

"(Our) main goal is to help the customers do well," she said. "We are concerned on a personal level that they succeed. ... We want our customers to know how important they are."

She's comfortable as she talks about the store. She's calm as she talks about taking samples of feed to farms. And she feels good that there's no longer the nagging question of how she'll make it work; rather, she and her team talk about how they can keep the momentum going, how they can continue improving.

Sandy is not solely responsible for doubling the amount of feed that goes out to farms, or tripling sales for the company. But co-workers and customers said she made good decisions, partly due to her determination to understand the business, and partly due to her natural intelligence and knack for organizing.

Her relationships also were key — relationships that spread warm words about the business.

She bonded with Schlangen. He and his wife would come into the store, and sometimes brought with them a pan of salted nut roll bars — one of Sandy's favorites. He knew the kind of pain that comes from deep loss, and the kind of support she would need. His father died almost 10 years ago. He told her to stay strong and rely on her friends.

At times they shared a couple of tears at the store counter, a rare but important moment when Sandy could ease her guard. But she never fully broke down, he said, something that still amazes him.

"I always said, man, she's made of cement," he said. "But she's warm."

He still comes to the store about once a week. They remember Randy fondly in conversation.

Such relationships helped the business become what it is.

She emphasizes the team atmosphere and marvels at customers and employees. Everyone's role is important. "No one can say, that's your job, not mine," she said.

Her flexibility and openness help, too. Sandy is as willing to work on a computer as she is to throw 50-pound bags of feed into a truck, Schlangen said.

Eldred Froehling, 79, had worked at the feed store since it opened more than 20 years ago as Tri-County Feeds.

Like others, he speaks highly of Sandy and her abilities to lead the business in a small community.

"She pays attention to details and is willing to learn," he said.

Revelations

Somewhere between the hospital room in Minneapolis and the feed store in Watkins, Sandy Hansen learned to live again.

It took years. It took reflection and time spent talking to important people in her life, including some close friends and family.

She had cared for Randy for so long that she lost her identity. She had to reinvent herself.

Her spirituality was her base. "We have a God that does not let us down."

Sandy had a watershed year last year. She made a New Year's resolution to "start living again." She hadn't done much besides work and grieve. So she took up running, something she hadn't done in 10 years. She joined Toastmasters in St. Cloud and started playing volleyball. She joined the local economic development authority and the Twin Cities-based National Speakers Association. She's become more social, going to happy hour with friends, attending theater or going shopping. "I think I found a balance," she said.

She put up Christmas decorations for the first time since Randy died — snowmen stockings by a windowsill, and a Santa in a sleigh on the floor.

She accepted life as a single woman. She had dated, but finally stopped resenting that she's single.

And she faced a stage of grief she had ignored: anger.

She also cut back her hours to a more reasonable 35-40 per week.

She recalls a day in the hospital when she and Randy talked about how they never wanted to work their lives away.

"We so longed for everyday life," she said, like cutting the grass and doing laundry or dishes. Eating at Anton's or Red Lobster. Talking with friends.

"If (working is) all you do, then what do you have at the end of your life?" she said.

Although Randy wasn't around to see it, she has kept her word. She thinks he'd be beaming if he could see her.

"It gave me a whole new reason to experience what we can get to see," she said.

Residual grief still permeates her life. Christmas is usually the hardest time. A week before Christmas 2007 she woke and recalled her memories of Randy on ventilators.

And it's the little things she misses the most. Like Raisin Bran with Randy in the morning before work. Dinner together and watching TV on the couch side by side. His notes that read, "Have a good day. See you tonight."

There were nights that she still watched out the window, hoping his truck would pull into the driveway.

But she prayed to God. She leaned on friends and family. She let her guard down when she most needed it.

"Even when you think you hit rock bottom, there's still hope," she said.

The road ahead

When Sandy goes for her morning walk or run, she thinks about the day ahead, the road ahead. Daily she thanks God for all she has, despite all she has lost.

There are days she wonders if she has truly processed all her feelings. No one is probably ever done grieving, she reasons.

People ask from time to time why she has not remarried. She's as open to the idea as she is to other possibilities in life. She'll keep going with the business, but if the time should come to sell it, she might be open to that, too.

Life as she knew it changed forever. She's not living the traditional family life she thought she would.

But she learned powerful life lessons and gained a strength she didn't know she had.

She has learned to appreciate little things: When someone works an extra hour. When she's invited to dinner. Stepping into a warm house. Sleeping in her own bed. Enjoying health. Nature.

And she's ready for death when it comes. Where she was afraid, she's now courageous. She knows there's more ahead.

"The big things in our life are very much out of our control," she said. "... I just pray for God's will."

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