

Forging a "Circle of Strength" from a string of disasters

By Kristine Price

Joanne Funch sits serenely in her tastefully decorated St. Michael home while soft snowflakes fall outside. Seated near her on the plump cushions, her cat watches visitors quietly; a little charm around her feline neck tinkling when she moves. Except for a lone raspberry colored wall in the background, all are painted in neutral tones, and the lines of the furniture curve. Like the woman who decorated the space, hard edges are missing.

It could have been otherwise. A few short years ago Joanne experienced a series of blows that could have left her bitter, but she's thriving today, and makes it her mission to share what she's learned with others.

"I'm still a work in progress," she laughs. Joanne's story is universal. How she handled her setbacks is not.

A Minnesota native living on the west coast, Joanne and her husband had a busy life. Their business was successful; their home palatial. In the back of her mind was an idea about creating something for women called "Circle of Strength."

The genesis for the idea came when she talked to other women her age, and noticed that nobody was having any fun. "Everybody was overbooked and giving, giving, giving." Joanne envisioned creating a connection for women to draw strength from other women.

She'd had practical experience at that. A born networker, she knew no one in the town she moved to after marrying her husband, and got busy contacting organizations she wanted to volunteer for. She looked for mentors in other women and reached out to them.

In 2004, Joanne addressed what she believed to be the missing fun factor by organizing an event for women she called a Pamper Party. Acknowledging that fun is a personal thing, Joanne believes we all know what our own idea of fun is, but put off acting on it enough. "We're so serious," she says. "We don't need to be reminded about that, we need to be reminded to have fun."

All the money raised at the event was donated to organizations that helped women. She had a strong desire to "give back," something she learned from her own mom. Giving to others in the community was, and is, a strong component of Circle of Strength.

The business she and her husband owned took center stage, however. The business was really taking off, and in 2005 the couple purchased a bigger manufacturing site for their operations.

Then in May, Joanne's beloved mother died. Less than a month later, her husband fell from a ladder and died of a head injury. In August her sister-in-law was diagnosed with cancer; in September her uncle died; and in December, her dad was diagnosed with prostate cancer.

Joanne found out life isn't like slapstick comedy. There were no offstage sound effects creating fake slap sounds, no stuntmen taking pratfalls. She had to find a way to cope.

"My whole life changed in a moment," she reflects. "I was faced with this business, employees, how to go forward. It's devastating, losing the constants in your life."

Decisions faced her everywhere she turned. How to keep the business going and provide for all the employees? How to fix things her husband always took care of?

She credits her faith for getting her through, and not allowing herself to indulge in thoughts of 'why me'? Her prayer was simply: "Give me strength to get through this."

One of the first lessons she was forced to accept was that she had to "get rid of the ego and learn to ask for help," a lesson she admits was profoundly difficult. Fiercely independent all her life, it was tough to ask others for help.

Possessions hardly seemed important. She experienced a desire to downsize and simplify everything. After two decades in California, Joanne decided to sell the business and the big house and return to Minnesota to be near her family. Now, of her townhouse, she says she can just "lock the door and leave."

The next step in her journey was an important one. For an entire summer, she confides, she "did nothing." If someone called to tempt her into some commitment, she'd tell them "Call me in September."

Of this time of doing nothing, Joanne says she learned the most: to slow down and breathe, and to listen - not just to people, but to the world around her. She took the time to get to know neighbors, and have her dad over regularly for dinner. She took walks and forced herself out of old habits, like checking the e-mail often.

Joanne's life is changed forever, she says, and today she lives life "deliberately."

"I don't put off until tomorrow what I can do today," she comments. There are things she does each day to remind herself of the goodness of life, like keeping a

gratitude journal, and filling her surroundings with inspiration and beauty. She doesn't save the cloth napkins just for company anymore, and she entertains her friends often.

If she can send an e-mail or pick up a phone and hear a live voice, she will "always pick up the phone." If the choice is between some engagement and having dinner with her dad, she will always choose time with her dad.

Through the process of bouncing back, Joanne decided not to spend anymore of her life doing what she didn't love. And as long as she was reinventing herself anyway, she figured she would do what she was always passionate about.

Thus the old dream of creating a circle of strength for other women resurfaced, and after her summer sabbatical, she swung into action continuing it.

"Women are the ones who strengthen

families and, in turn, their communities," was Joanne's reasoning, believing if women cared more for themselves, everyone else would benefit too.

"As we approach the second half of life, we're asking ourselves a lot of questions anyway about 'what's next'? My approach is, maybe if you're having more fun, you'll figure out what's next."

Joanne tells other women to nurture those who are their cheerleaders. "Who brings you strength?" she regularly asks women. "Who is your support?"

"I encourage other women to do what they want, even if they think they can't. You just have to want it bad enough."

Joanne's wisdom about

getting through loss has helped others too. Some of the things she tells others include:

- Reach out to others for help.
- Celebrate the small victories.
- Believe in something.
- Share your memories of your loved one.
- Find your own way to let go. People aren't their things.
- Recognize what matters.
- Appreciate that you loved and were loved.

Circle of Strength plans events that benefit women, including a clothes swap for women entering the workforce. Information about the events and Joanne's inspirational blog can be read at www.circleofstrength.com.

Joanne admits to not knowing where it's all heading and doesn't try and figure it out. "I just try to stay in the present moment now," she says.

"If just one person is helped by what I share, that's good enough for me," she smiles.

