



After near-death by disease, determined teen struggles to rebuild herself, her life . . .

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Since she was a toddler, Jelena Hatfield, 16, of Reno dreamed of a modeling career.

Her family never doubted that the willful, determined girl would accomplish her goals. By the time she was a high school junior, she'd won and placed third in beauty pageants. In April, she was picking out clothes for an assignment as a model for a Yellow Pages advertisement. Now, though, Jelena's will isn't focused on taking a graceful turn on the runway. It's on rebuilding herself. A rare form of bacterial meningitis, which nearly killed her April 23, has left her in constant pain and with disfigurement that most adults could not face and most teenagers would recoil from. "I think of how I was so vain and had to look so perfect," Jelena said, glancing quickly away from a photo of herself in a modeling pose among family pictures on a hospital room wall. **"Now I just hope that I can walk. Just that I can feed myself," she said.**

Doctors had to amputate the tips of her fingers and thumb on her left hand, and all the digits above the first and second knuckles on her right hand. Her fingers turned black and mummified from a lack of blood supply. Most of the skin and muscle died on her legs, leaving her bones exposed.

Six and a half weeks ago, Jelena was a typical teenager said her mother, Denise Rehm, 37, of Reno. "All she

"I know I lived for a reason. There's a purpose for it," Jelena said. As she lay in her intensive care bed, she saw a reflection in the blank television screen that gave comfort. "I looked and saw a woman with one hand on her face, and the other on her hip," she said. "She was obviously a spirit. She was there for two or three days." In all, Jelena saw six spirits - five women and a man - reflected in the television screen during those first two weeks in the hospital. "I felt comfortable and was thankful they were there," she said. Someone was watching over Jelena, said Dawn Dollarhide, a critical care technician in the intensive care unit. Dollarhide continues to visit Jelena since her patient left ICU three weeks ago. "I totally believe she had angels in her room," Dollarhide said.

But Jelena hasn't depended on angels for her recovery. Typically, after she's awakened at 6 a.m., her day consists of exercises to strengthen her arms, which lost some skin and muscle. They too were deprived of blood and oxygen as her body fought to keep her brain, heart and kidneys working, and the extremities were left to wither. One of the toughest parts of her day: hours spent at the Hyperbaric Oxygen Clinic in Nevada. She forced herself to overcome claustrophobia to be able to stay inside a coffin-like hyperbaric chamber for several hours at a time. The chamber delivers pure oxygen at a pressure three times that of normal atmosphere. The process is used to speed healing. "See this pink, that's new good skin," Jelena said, carefully peeling back a section of the dressing on her left arm. "Her courage - her strength she's touched my soul," Dollarhide said, wiping tears as she stood outside Jelena's hospital room.

Being able to grasp anything between the shortened fingers on her left hand hasn't been easy. Jelena is right-handed. But she's learned to brush her teeth, grasp a fork, wipe her nose and apply lip balm using her left hand, which was less damaged. The 16-year-old accepted the loss of her fingers and the oozing, blackened skin on her legs before Rehm could look at her daughter's scarred body, Rehm said, brushing Jelena's thick, straight brown hair into a ponytail. Jelena had beautiful, long, piano playing fingers, Rehm said. "She still does," she added softly. The first time she saw her hands after surgery was

Denise Rehm, 57, of Reno. All she cared about was if her shoes matched her dress - and that's all she needed to be worrying about." Jelena stopped being typical when she was wheeled into the emergency room. Doctors say at that moment she became a miracle. Jelena thought she had stomach flu or food poisoning as she was rushed to Washoe Medical Center in an incoherent daze. She protested as paramedics searched for needle marks. They thought the woozy teen, with purple splotches on her body, was having a drug overdose. Once in the emergency room, a sample of Jelena's spinal fluid told the story: She was suffering from Neisseria meningitides, a rare form of bacterial meningitis. Rehm watched helplessly as her waxy-faced daughter looked at her and told her she loved her and to tell family and friends she loved them, because "I'm dying." Within hours, Jelena was unconscious and in shock. Her blood pressure dropped as her body shut down to fight toxins in her blood. Doctors frantically fought to keep her alive. Drugs to divert blood to vital organs - her brain, heart and kidneys - were dripped from intravenous lines. She was put on a ventilator to breathe. **"I was told she had about six to 12 hours to live," Rehm said.**

But 48 hours later, Jelena's bluegreen eyes opened. Her mother had no doubt she was going to make it. Doctors weren't so sure. "I truly thought she was going to die," said Dr. Steven Parker, a Reno infectious-disease specialist. "I truly believe she's a miracle," he said. "She told me a lot of people were praying for her. There was some intervention beyond what we were doing that brought her through this."

hard, Jelena said, glancing from her lap to her mother's somber face. But she quickly added this perspective: "I'd rather not have my fingers and be alive than have my fingers and be dead." She'll get prosthetic fingers one day, she said. "It's time for new ones anyway," she joked to her mom. The realization that she almost died is what's keeping Jelena from falling apart, Rehm said. Jelena's strong will astounded everyone, including her godmother, Priscilla Black of Palm Springs, Calif. Black, along with a stepbrother, grandmothers and Rehm, have kept a vigil in Jelena's hospital room since she was admitted. "She's frightened, but she keeps pushing herself," Black said.

Jelena insisted on being told about her condition as soon as she was stable. She wasn't happy with two surprises she's had so far. When she awoke from the surgery to remove her fingers, she found the dead skin and muscle also had been cut off her legs. Doctors later decided to put rods in her ankles to stabilize them while doing a scheduled surgery to sew up her right hand. Finding rods in her ankles was devastating. Jelena had endured painful exercises between parallel bars to be able to walk. "I was trying really hard, and they put these in me and I can't walk," she said, wriggling in the wheelchair as a flash of pain jarred her. Nerves in her hands, arms and legs - stripped of the protective covering of her skin - are constantly firing pain signals, Rehm explained. She's learning to deal with the constant throbbing and sudden searing, stabbing pains that cut through the morphine and other painkillers. "We're just concentrating on saving her legs now," Rehm said. That operation scares her, Jelena admitted. "That's a really big one."

For now, Denise Rehm has made herself concentrate on the progress Jelena is making in her recovery. "She amazes me," she said, watching Jelena gingerly use her scarred hands to roll a wheelchair a few feet. **"I can't take it still," she said of the pain she'd seen flash across her daughter's eyes.**

By Barbara Anderson RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL - Sunday, June 7, 1998

Note: Since the above was written Jelena's legs have been amputated just below the knees and her fingers are shorter too. She faces years of skin grafts and therapy.

Jelena's birthday is October 5.

