

Eight years later Winters woman still lives with effects of West Nile virus

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Marie Heilman (Woodland Daily Democrat)

WINTERS >> For Marie Heilman, West Nile virus is more than just something she protects her kids against, it's something she has survived.

She was diagnosed with West Nile virus in 2006.

"It was my faith that helped me to survive," Heilman said. "It gave strength to me and my family. I don't know if we would be able to handle this without our faith."

Even though Heilman, 48, lived through the experience, her life has been forever altered by the effects of the virus. She has optical nerve damage, spurts of memory loss, muscle spasms, some hearing loss and constant migraines.

"The vision problems don't go away," Heilman said. "I often have to tell my husband to turn the light down. I wear prescription sunglasses. I can't sew or quilt like I used to."

Although, Heilman still faces challenges, she considers herself "one of the lucky ones." She has had to learn how to adjust to living with her health issues. She has, in some cases, used technology to do so.

She can't follow recipes in books like she used to.

"I try to do the recipes from memory or use audiobooks," Heilman said.

She also has to make lists so that she doesn't forget things.

"There are times where I have been doing something and just can't remember," she said.

Heilman has made other adjustments to make life a little easier.

"I have my phone set on the largest font and a 24-inch flat-screen TV."

The day that Heilman contracted West Nile more than eight years ago was just like any other day.

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She had just dropped off her eldest daughter at the airport after a weekend visit from out of state, when she suddenly felt ill.

"I know I was bitten by a mosquito, probably while gardening outside or mowing the lawn," Heilman said. "When you get bit you start to see symptoms within two weeks."

Heilman's first symptoms were vertigo, feeling lethargic and being exhausted.

"I was dizzy, sick to my stomach and had a headache at first," she said. "It was really out of left field ... I thought it was just a summer flu."

When Heilman returned from the airport she went straight to bed.

She said her husband found her still in bed when he came home at 6:30 p.m.

"I remember him being really confused and asking if I was OK," she said.

Heilman recalls that her head was pounding and she was vomiting constantly.

"It was so confusing," she said. "I just slept for so long."

Heilman remembers her symptoms increasing very quickly.

She said on the first day she went to the doctor, had blood work done and was told she probably had a virus or some kind of bug.

"I was told to come back on Friday if the bug wasn't gone," Heilman said. "I drove myself back on Friday but I don't remember most of it."

From what family and friends told her, she couldn't walk and was rolled into the doctor's office in a wheelchair.

According to Heilman, part of the virus makes your brain swell.

"It's almost like a drain," she said. "You are witnessing something but it's really hard to remember it."

Heilman said she had a lumbar puncture done and then spent 15 days in ICU at Woodland Memorial Hospital.

"All I remember is the needle in my back," she said. "I didn't even know what a lumbar puncture was at the time."

Heilman said her bloodwork came back fine.

"The scary part was not having doctors with experience with West Nile," she said. "They could only treat my symptoms. All I knew is that I was really sick. I didn't know if it was the disease or the medication."

Heilman said that when she left Woodland Memorial she couldn't walk.

She only remembers a few things from her last day in the hospital.

"I remember my husband signing a Do Not Resuscitate order," she said. "I remember my son begging me not to leave him. I remember thinking I needed to leave or I would die there."

Heilman demanded to leave the hospital and said she wouldn't take any more medication from the nurses. She said she was readmitted 24 hours after she left the hospital because she was heavily medicated.

"When people saw me after I was out of the hospital they would say things like 'You're alive; I am shocked you lived'," Heilman said.

Since her ordeal she has committed herself to helping others prevent and learn about West Nile virus.

She sat on the board of the Sacramento-Yolo Mosquito & Vector Control District until she could no longer attend the meetings because of her difficulty driving. She also volunteered with the district and spent time handing out doorhangers alerting people of West Nile in her community.

"People need to know that they are not an exception," she said. "People are naive to think this won't happen to them,"

Heilman continues to volunteer in her community working with Meals on Wheels, while searching for survivors of West Nile on Facebook in her free time.

"I go out of my way to spread awareness about West Nile," she said. "As difficult as this was and continues to be, I don't regret it. God uses people to connect people to other people."