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Amputee spurs teachers to see student promise

Teacher shares message at exceptional children meeting

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One morning in April 2005, Arizona high school math teacher Jeff Lewis stayed home from work because he thought he was coming down with a bad case of flu.

A few hours later, his fever soaring, he was rushed to a hospital and lapsed into unconsciousness. Three weeks later, he woke up with no hands or feet. Doctors had amputated his legs just below the knees and his arms just below the elbows to save him from a deadly infection.

"My stomach just sank to the floor" when he saw his stumps for the first time, Lewis said. But a day later, he was through with self-pity and eager to resume his favorite pastimes.

"I have what they call a positive attitude," Lewis said. "Most people who wake up with an amputation, the first thing they ask is not, 'How am I going to bowl and golf?'"

Lewis, 54, told his story Friday to hundreds of special education teachers, counselors and others at The Wynfrey Hotel in Hoover. He was the keynote speaker at the annual conference of the Alabama Federation of the Council for Exceptional Children.

Federation President Richard Gargiulo, who learned of Lewis from a USA Today article, said his story reminds teachers and parents to focus on the potential of children with disabilities.

"You look at the ability, not the disability," Gargiulo said. "And you don't allow the disability to frame who they are as a person."

Lewis, wearing a flowery shirt and shorts, peppered his inspirational talk with jokes, an original song and impressions of John Wayne and Herman Munster. He has an assortment of explanations for strangers curious about his missing limbs, including: "I had an affair with a lumberjack's wife."

Shot in 1985:

The near-deadly infection was related to an earlier stroke of horrific chance. In 1985, Lewis was accidentally shot by a neighbor while standing on his back porch. The bullet remains lodged between his spine and aorta.

Lewis lost his spleen as a result of the shooting, and that weakened his ability to fight the bacteria that would strike him 20 years later.

In 2005, his weight dropped from 185 pounds to 103 during the stay in the hospital.

But within days of waking up an amputee, Lewis was talking to his principal about returning to work at Mountain View High School in Mesa. He was back on the job in eight months and has taught full time since, as well as part time at a community college.

And he didn't give up his hobbies. He bowled a 172 last week.

"I still play golf, maybe better than I did before because I can't hit them out of bounds anymore. I just sort of tap them down the middle," Lewis said.

Lewis spent much of his talk Friday praising his wife, Carol. It was she who persuaded doctors to amputate his feet and hands as a last resort against the infection, even though they pegged his survival chances at

about 1 percent.

"I just believed that Jeff is not the kind of person who is going to waste his life," Carol Lewis said.

Kim Mitchell, 27, a first-grade teacher at C.J. Donald Elementary School in Fairfield who is pursuing a master's degree in special education, said educators should be advocates for children in the same way.

"The person who believed in him the most and fought for him the most was his wife," Mitchell said. "As educators, we are fighting for kids to encourage them to get the best education they can possibly get."

A purpose somewhere:

Lewis loves to laugh but turns serious when he talks about making his life count. He said he feels called to share his story.

"I do believe in God," Lewis said. "I don't believe he did this to me. But I believe he kept me around for a purpose."

Lewis said he misses playing the guitar, banjo and mandolin. But he said he won't dwell on what he can't do, an outlook he credits partly to his mother, who stayed positive despite crippling rheumatoid arthritis.

What has he learned most from his own ordeal?

"That I want to keep kicking and screaming and dancing and honky-tonking with my wife until I cash out of this world."

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