

# She lost a leg, but found new outlook

## Townsend woman determined to live life to the fullest

By Hiroko Sato  
hsato@lowellsun.com

TOWNSEND — Karol DeStefano may struggle to open a door or do laundry while in a wheelchair, but that doesn't mean she wants your help.

With her stainless-steel grabber, she'll work at picking up a piece of paper on the floor herself, no matter how long it might take, she says.

For the 54-year-old former nurse, losing a leg never meant losing her independence. So, just a few days after the amputation of her right leg last September, she pushed herself out of bed.

She has already learned how to use a walker and can't wait walk into her garden on her prosthetic foot.

After all, gardening is what makes her feel alive. "You take nothing and make it pretty."

This is DeStefano's first spring since an unexpected medical problem forced her to have her right leg amputated from the knee down.

Despite the blow, DeStefano is feeling strong and upbeat, saying things will only get better from here.

The ordeal began just after she had knee-replacement surgery due to arthritis last June. Her body reacted negatively to one of the medications she took, causing blood clots and blocking circulation in her leg. She was transferred from Nashoba Valley Medical Center to

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Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston to remove the dead tissue from her foot.

In late August, when a series of attempts to resuscitate her foot, including two surgeries, failed, her doctor told her amputation was the next step, DeStefano says.

DeStefano's training as an operating-room nurse kicked in.

"When things happen, you look at the situation and handle it right there — and get stressed about it later," DeStefano says.

After mulling over the remote possibility that her foot would heal, she decided to have the amputation. From there, her mind began a dash toward recovery.

In her two weeks at New England Rehabilitation Hospital Satellite in Lowell,

DeStefano learned how to balance her body and train the muscles. The therapists made her bake a cake in an apartment-like unit set up on the floor so that she could figure out how to take things out of the cupboard, sift flour and clean the dishes while using a walker. They did laundry with her and let her fold clothes.

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The staff was



pleased with DeStefano's acceptance of the prosthetic leg.

"She didn't see it as a foreign object," said Laura Degaravilla, an occupational therapist who treated DeStefano.

DeStefano's parents, Rose and Albert DeStefano, were at her side every day throughout the process.

Her children — Matthew, Christopher and Katelyn Stefanilo, ranging in age from 23 to 27 — her daughter-in-law, Ashley Stefanilo, began helping her clean her house, take a shower and cook.

She still can do what she needs, but through a different process — one that involves use of a grabber or help from others, she says.

"The biggest key is to not fight the change," she says, adding, "The most important thing is, if you are in a situation like mine ... you should have somebody who can advocate for you."

Of course, there are obstacles. She now calls places ahead of time to make sure they're accessible to the disabled. She had to pass on pumpkin-picking with her family last fall.

But she is grateful that she can now enjoy playing with her grandchildren again.

"For sure, by the time spring comes next year, I should be able to do what I want," she said, looking fondly at her garden.



Karol DeStefano of Townsend is getting used to life with a prosthetic leg. A bad reaction to medication after knee-replacement surgery led to the removal of her right leg last fall.

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**Above:** Karol DeStefano of Townsend since a surgical complication last fall led to have her right leg removed. **Below:** DeStefano shows off a quilt she made during her recovery. SUN PHOTOS JON HILL



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