Healing Ethelette’s Hands So She Can Communicate With The World

DEBORAH’S GOT HER RHYTHM BACK

PAIN-FREE MARGARET’S DOING WHAT SHE LOVES
All her life, Fort Howard resident Ethelette Ennis has used her hands to communicate through sign language. As a member of the deaf community and a sign interpreter for deaf and blind people, her ability to express herself using her hands is essential both personally and professionally. But an accident almost took that ability to communicate away.

One evening, her two dogs got into a fight. When she tried to separate them, one of the dogs attacked, biting both her hands severely. The middle finger of her right hand was so badly injured that it hung limply from her bleeding hand. Her son called 911 and, because of the nature of her injuries, she was brought to The Curtis National Hand Center at MedStar Union Memorial Hospital.

When Kenneth Means, Jr., MD, one of the Center’s board-certified orthopaedic and hand surgeons and clinical research director of The Curtis National Hand Center, assessed her injuries, he said that her damaged
middle right finger might need to be amputated.

“I didn’t cry or panic,” she remembers. “But I kept thinking, ‘How am I going to communicate?’ The middle finger is a part of so many words in American Sign Language that losing it would mean that I’d have to learn how to sign with my left hand. I told Dr. Means, ‘What if someone told you they had to cut off part of your tongue? How would you feel?’ And he answered, ‘Let’s figure out how we can save that finger.’”

Dr. Means performed emergency surgery to repair the damaged tendons, nerves and blood vessels in her hands and was able to save her middle finger and restore the function of both hands. She also needed a bone graft and fusion of a fractured finger on her left hand. “Most of the members of my family are also deaf so they were as relieved as I was that I’d still be able to sign with my right hand,” Ennis says.

“I will be able to sign again!” As part of her recovery, Ennis underwent about six months of rehabilitation therapy at The Curtis National Hand Center. “At times, recovery was frustrating,” she explains. “At first my hands were completely covered in bandages so my husband, who is also deaf, and I mouthed words to each other but he had a hard time understanding what I was trying to say. I’d ask for pasta for dinner but he’d think I said rice. I couldn’t clean the house. I couldn’t take a shower or feed myself. But I kept reminding myself this was going to be a step-by-step process and I needed to think positive. I told myself over and over, ‘I will be able to sign again!’”

Becky Saunders, the physical and certified hand therapist who worked with Ennis throughout her recovery, remembers, “It was hard for Ethelette to look at the injuries to her hands, which is a common response. Your hands are such an important part of who you are and how you interact with the world, especially in her case. The exercises you need to do to rebuild your strength and function after this type of trauma take time but she stuck to it and worked through the discomfort and frustration.”

Adds Ennis, “I didn’t want to stay home because I couldn’t do things for myself or communicate. I didn’t want to say, ‘I can’t,’ so I worked hard to get back to being able to use my hands like I used to, even though it was tough at times.”

“People can’t tell my hands were ever injured” Now that she’s recovered, Ennis says people she encounters at work and in the community who didn’t know she was injured tell her they would never suspect that she had been so badly hurt and close to losing a finger. She signs quickly and fluidly, keeping up with the rapid pace of her thoughts, and there are no visible scars on her hands.
“I’m so lucky. I’m able to do all the things I could before my accident. I have my independence back and I’m back to normal,” Ennis says. “If I had walked into any other emergency room, I would most likely have lost my finger. I don’t think I would have recovered as well as I have. I’m really fortunate that I was brought to MedStar Union Memorial and The Curtis National Hand Center. I even referred a woman I know who was having problems with her hands to Dr. Means. He saved the day for me.”

“When a patient says that everything is back to normal, that’s what I love to hear,” adds Dr. Means. “That’s what keeps us doing what we do. When we’re able to get someone back to doing what they love, there’s nothing better. And with someone like Ms. Ennis, helping make sure she was able to continue to communicate and stay connected through sign language, that’s an even greater success story.”

To make an appointment with a hand specialist at The Curtis National Hand Center at MedStar Union Memorial, call 855-546-2105.