

Portland's Jan Schumacher rebuilds her life, minus her fingers

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By Anne Saker, The Oregonian

Jan Schumacher, a woman who had a high-end bridal shop but lost the fingers on both hands, is learning to use a mechanical prosthetic that helps her to recover some of the abilities she had lost along with her fingers.

Jan Schumacher of Southeast Portland stands before you a ball of energy, a business owner's mind with a saleswoman's smile. But she will tell you that her No. 1 asset today is something more Americans are acquiring every day.

A survival narrative.

Almost every family history holds at least one chapter of a grandparent, parent, sibling, spouse or child who was near death, felt the touch of modern medicine and got another chance.

"But I really got a miracle," says Schumacher, and she holds up her hands: She is missing all or parts of all her fingers.

In 2008, an out-of-control blood infection did everything it could to kill her. What saved her was a massive injection of steroids. But survival did not mean cure. More than 30 surgeries did not restore what was lost.

What she's learned, she says, is that coming back from the dead is a do-it-yourself proposition.



Jan Schumacher and her husband Dale at home. Ross William Hamilton/The Oregonian

Schumacher and her husband, Dale, have managed to hold on to their elegant house near Happy Valley, largely because Schumacher has resources like few others. She once owned Tres Fabu, the Sellwood store that was the biggest bridal-dress outlet in Oregon until she closed the business when she lost her fingers.

The inventory now hangs by the hundreds from extra-tall racks in the living room, dining room, garage, upstairs hall and two bedrooms. A few days a week, brides buy from her, and the sales pay the mortgage and the Schumachers' share of the more than \$2 million billed to their \$1,600-a-month health-insurance policy.



In the upstairs hall of her Southeast Portland house, Jan Schumacher helps Sabrina Martincek go through wedding dresses. Schumacher once owned Tres Fabu, the Sellwood bridal store, but when Schumacher got sick, closed it and moved the inventory to her house. Ross William Hamilton/The Oregonian

Yet ... Schumacher daydreams of being free one day of organza and satin everywhere. But she has struggled thinking about what she can do next. Before she got sick, she could sell anything as long as she believed in it. But so much of selling is in the handshake.

She holds up her "paws" and says, "Who would hire me now? I mean, it's crazy, isn't it?"

When a bride calls to make an appointment, Schumacher delivers a standard caution: "Look, you're coming to my home. I've closed the store. I've suffered a serious medical episode. I've been hospitalized. I'm handicapped now. I've lost my fingers."

That information spooks some callers: "They don't say no, they use another excuse. They say, I'll call you back. That's fine. If they're not going to be comfortable here, the magic won't be here."

When the blood infection went supernova in July 2008, Schumacher lay at Providence St. Vincent Medical Center and only worsened. The last resort was the steroid injection, which drove blood to her heart and brain. But the outrushing collapsed the capillaries and small vessels in her extremities. Her toes turned black, feet, legs, trunk, breasts, shoulders, tip of her nose, ears, arms, her French-manicured hands. The term actually is mummification.

Transferred to the Oregon Burn Center at Legacy Emanuel Medical Center, Schumacher lay for five months waiting ... her ears pinked up, so did her nose and her 10 toes. But she lost the four right fingers to the knuckles and the four left fingers to the first joint. Her pared-away thumbs lost size and function. Surgery after surgery. Skin grafts. More skin grafts.

She bridled at how much of life she was missing, and she desperately wanted to talk with people. She knew she was a pain to the nurses when she rang for help to make a phone call.

"They would have that look on their face, and I completely understood what they were thinking; yeah, they had better things to do than hold the phone. But it was important to communicate, with someone, to hear someone's voice."

In December 2008, she was discharged. For months, her husband did everything for her -- "I mean everything." But once she got the inventory moved to her house, and she gained strength, she got back to selling.

She has arranged the grand two-story foyer of her home as a dressing area, with a grand full-length Tres Fabu mirror. Veils, tiaras and flowered headpieces fill small tables. A discreet card reads: "All Sales Are Final."



For more than two years, Jan Schumacher has been working with Advanced Arm Dynamics in Tigard, which builds upper-body prosthetics. After one visit to the company, Schumacher takes the "hand" for a spin at a local restaurant.

"Brides have been good medicine," she says. "But I want to find something that I can do myself. I want to help. Maybe I could get into the army hospitals, talk with those soldiers, find out what they think is our top priorities as amputees."



Jan Schumacher, right, and bride-to-be Sabrina Martincek look to see how the daylight reflects off her just chosen wedding dress. Ross William Hamilton/The Oregonian

She has a bride coming in to try on her dress; the young woman arrives with a friend -- they are speech pathologists in the Forest Grove schools. The bride's mother arrives as Schumacher carries the chosen dress downstairs.

The bride slips it on. Perfect. The younger women discuss shoes, and Mom asks Schumacher, "Are you ordering more dresses?"

Schumacher laughs. "I'm going to close out the inventory and retire." She corrects herself. "Not retire. Just going to another chapter."

Then she starts talking out loud, her thoughts spilling out, maybe she could work with people isolated through trauma, "maybe get some computers and some software and some voice-activated things for people who've lost hands. So it's not a struggle to stay connected, to stay relevant, to stay plugged into society."

Wedding chatter ceases. The speech pathologists are listening, and in unison, they say, "That's awesome."

The bride's friend says, "We do augmentative communications devices, too, and we train kids how to use them, kids who either can't speak or have cerebral palsy. And adults, too."

Schumacher stands up straight, suddenly alert. "How do you use them?"

"Some have touch screens. Some even have software that read eye blinks."

Schumacher gazes past all the wedding dresses. "Yes," she says, "I'd be very interested in connecting with you and learning more about it."

The bride, friend and mother leave, and Schumacher moves slowly to a kitchen chair. Her body aches. Her hands throb. She needs to lie down for a while, she's shot for the day ... but how could she sleep now, with this little gift that she just received, this vision:

a patient in a faded cotton gown,

coming back from the dead,

making a phone call all on her own.