

LINCOLN COUNTY - SCARS OF FREEDOM

"It's okay to say I screwed up and that I have scars, and I'll sport my scars proudly because I put up a good fight and I'm free." -- Michelle Grier

Michelle Grier never gave up on hope.

There were times it was all she had to hang on to. But for this North Platte woman, giving up wasn't even an option.

Maybe it was the spousal abuse that made her wise beyond her years, or the loss of employment as a single mom of two when Multiple Sclerosis began to consume her body.

If you asked Michelle, she would credit her strength to her father and rural Nebraska upbringing.

Despite the hard work of growing up on a ranch, Michelle's life seemed like one of almost fairy tale quality. Her family was a close-knit unit that worked together.

In fact, it was the lure of ranch life that brought Michelle's family back to rural Hershey, Nebraska from Idaho when she was only seven. "My father worked for the Idaho Department of Roads when he got his arm caught in a core drill and it was ripped from his shoulder. It was his right hand so they didn't want to put him back in the field," she recalls. "They said they'd give him a desk job but he wasn't a desk kind of guy, so he said 'I'll go back to Nebraska and farm and ranch'."

After Michelle graduated from Hershey High School in 1982, she headed off to the Lincoln School of Commerce.

"But I wasn't ready for college," she readily admits. "I lived 12 miles south of Hershey. Our closest neighbors were four miles from us and that was our grandparents. Our phone was a North Platte phone so all my calls were long distance. When you take a girl off a ranch and put her smack dab in downtown Lincoln, Nebraska ... I wasn't thinking about accounting anymore."

Michelle took on two jobs -- at a bank and as a waitress -- and eventually dropped out of college. "I made a lot of friends but there were alcohol and drugs involved and that was scary for me, because that wasn't my reality growing up."

She knew she needed to get closer to home, so Michelle moved back, working 80 hours a week as a bookkeeper Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., then waitressing until 11 p.m. at the same truck stop she had worked at since she was 13. But Michelle missed her friends and Lincoln, so when she got off work on Friday nights, she drove to Lincoln for the weekend, then back to work early Monday morning.

She followed this pattern for a year until a good friend from Lincoln moved to North Platte and Michelle didn't feel the need to travel to Lincoln so often. In 1985, she spotted an ad in the paper for residential trainers to work with the developmentally disabled in a group home setting. She was hired and felt certain she had found her niche: "I'd bring home training books to read and couldn't wait to go back to work to try something I'd thought of."

It didn't take long for this energetic 22-year-old to be promoted to women's supervisor. It was then she met the supervisor of the men's residence. The two fell in love and soon Michelle learned she was pregnant. He was unwilling to move forward in the relationship and even more uncertain about the baby: "He was really torn. I told him we were friends before we were anything else."

This is a gift and I'm going to take it and if you want to be a part of that or if you can't for whatever reason, that's okay, too."

Michelle's gift was a beautiful baby boy she named Zach. "Interestingly," she says, "Zach's dad has been really involved with him in the past five years." It was her son's stepfather that placed her in a situation she had never been familiar with.

Michelle had gone from a "wonderful life growing up" into a marriage turned abusive. The couple had a daughter together, but the marriage was short lived when he preferred drugs and alcohol to supporting his family. Now Michelle had twice the parental responsibility and knew she needed to protect her children. In 1997, she married a second time. Although the marriage was tumultuous, it ended amicably after a year and a half. It was a relationship that began in 1998 with a man that left Michelle fighting for the securities and peace she had taken for granted her entire life.

"I'm trying to figure out how this strong independent woman became a shell of a person in her own house," she looks back. "I was terrified in my own house. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to do. Even after I had him removed from the house I slept on the couch for a year and a half with my cordless phone in my hand just waiting for a noise.

"I think a lot of it was low self-esteem and someone paying attention to me in a way I hadn't been paid attention to. And a lot of it was my ex-partner growing up in a bad home. I thought if I can just show him some security, some stability, some unconditional love -- that was going to make the truth different. And somewhere in the process I lost myself. I even needed reconstructive surgery on my face."

It wasn't until Michelle's father made her angry that she made the decision to change her life. She had always been especially close to her father -- a "daddy's girl" she calls herself. Upon making a visit to her parents, Michelle's father had "had it" with his daughter's abusive situation. "He knew I was smarter than that and I kept going back. He told me if I kept going back, I deserved every blow I got."

"I got mad because that's what I do," Michelle said of their conversation. "I left my folks and went back home. (My partner) wasn't abusive that night but as I sat there reflecting on that, I thought: I can't put my parents through that anymore. My dad doesn't talk like that, and reflecting on it I knew he was right."

When Michelle's partner left for a pack of cigarettes at 4 a.m. the next morning and wasn't back by 9 a.m., she knew he was out doing drugs. She packed her bags and called her mother for a ride to the shelter. "I told my mother I'm not sure what's going to happen, but whatever happens, I know I can do it. I should have done it a long time ago."

Michelle and her two children were in the shelter for three and a half weeks. They went back home with the aid of a protection order, but when her abuser would return and break down the front door, the family of three was forced to flee to the shelter two more times.

The abuser was eventually incarcerated and the relationship over, yet, there was more Michelle had to deal with: "I was the only woman in Lincoln County who went to jail behind a protection order. He was sending me letters from jail so I responded with a card that said 'will you focus on you and not worry about me and mine, we're good.' I got charged for aiding and abetting violation of a protection order. I was in summer school and had to make arrangements for my two kids. I was working at the college and I couldn't go to work or take my classes or even have my books while I was in the county jail for a week. I couldn't understand why the jailers didn't get aiding and abetting -- they're the ones that sent his letters to me."

Life seemed to settle down, when in 1990, Michelle began to experience severe migraines. The headaches continued for five years: "There was a lot of fatigue and that was miserable. I was always tired to the point where I'd nod off at my desk but I had been diagnosed with clinical depression so I thought I'm just bummed out." Describing herself as a "Pollyanna" Michelle didn't feel sad, she just didn't understand.

In 2000, she experienced a numb strip from the top of her head to her neck. She was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and given medicinal injections that left her feeling flu-like symptoms. "I was so tired. I know now that some of that was depression, some was medication, some of it was MS. That's just something that doesn't go away. It was overwhelming. I worked two jobs, was a single mom of two kids and I just didn't have time to have Multiple Sclerosis."

Michelle's two jobs consisted of doing inventory at RGIS and working at a college for the physical print director, plus being a full time student at the college. After time, the MS forced her to quit her job at RGIS. Doing inventory in 14 to 17 hour shifts became unsafe. "We were on our knees and climbing ladders and my balance started getting poor. I thought I'm going to hurt myself or someone else so I let that go. I still tried to do the college (job). I did inventory, work orders and clerical stuff I could keep up with."

Then Michelle began experiencing optic neuritis. She would awake in the morning to blurred vision: "I would have to call the college and tell them I can't see but as soon as I can I will come in. It got to the point I called more than I could be there, and I said in all fairness to everyone, find someone that can be there."

So began the immense financial burdens, and "it was awful," Michelle said. "Zach's dad had been ordered to pay \$100 a month child support and that had never changed. He paid it faithfully until Zach turned 19 and then he was done. My ex-husband was ordered to pay \$132 a month. That was ordered in 1995 and he is several thousand dollars behind so I couldn't count on child support."

Michelle says she is blessed to live in low income housing; however, there's still utilities, car payments and basics that need paid. "I went back on ADC (Aid for Dependent Children) and we existed on \$393 a month and an EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) card for food stamps."

She was encouraged to apply for disability, and although her reply was always that she'd "get right on that" every time it was mentioned to her, she couldn't bring herself to succumb to that type of financial dependence. Finally, a friend who recognized it wasn't going to happen, helped her fill out an application: "She did me a really good service because when you fill out disability papers, you have to totally focus on what you can't do. And I didn't want to do that."

Despite all the medical problems, disability was denied: "They said I wasn't sick enough. I appealed and was denied a second time."

While watching TV one day, she came across a commercial stating if you've been denied disability, call the law office number on the screen. That's exactly what Michelle did. The lawyers took the case, but efforts were slow and the bills piling up fast. "I was told I will have a hearing scheduled and I can present my side of it. This went on for over a year so I wrote (Congressman) Tom Osborne and (Senator) Chuck Hagel and all my U.S. senators and Nebraska senators."

Along with the letter Michelle sent a copy of her work history from 1977 since she was 13 years old up until she was no longer able to work in 2002. In the letter she stated: Do you really think that I would choose to live on the State of Nebraska for \$363 a month hoping to get child support which I may or may not get, using food stamps, raising two children? Do you really think if I

weren't disabled I would sit here and allows this to be my quality of life and the quality of life for my children?

The letter gained response and assurance that the situation would be looked into. She also received phone calls and follow-ups. Her efforts paid off when the attorney called to give her the news that she was not going to need a hearing. Her case had been approved. "I usually don't ask people for anything unless it's a yes or no and I don't like being told no," Michelle said in good humor. "I got caught up on my bills and was able to get my kids some things that had been on hold for them."

But Michelle wasn't used to a non-employed lifestyle. "It was like ... this is it. This is what I do now. I'd never been a stay-at-home mom. I decided to do something to supplement my disability so I got a paper route, because with MS if you don't use it you lose it."

She didn't settle for one paper route -- she got two. Because of her reliability, she was offered to fill in on a route which meant getting up at 2 a.m. and working until 7 a.m., her children coming along sometimes to help. When winter arrived and the heater in Michelle's car died, she was scraping ice from the outside and inside. "But it was worth it," she smiled, "because I was still contributing my way. I did that until 2005 when my dad died."

"I never heard my dad say 'I'm disabled.' I never heard him complain; he just didn't. When I was growing up it was common when Daddy came in we knew we had to wash his hand because he had only one. He later figured out that if he took a wooden slat and wire and put a hand brush in it, he could put something heavy on the slat and rub his hand across. He was always coming up with stuff like that. He was just an awesome example. He did custom haying and could pitch hay like crazy with one hand. He just never quit."

His daughter followed those same work ethics. Michelle enrolled in college on scholarships and graduated in 2001 with an associate of applied science in business with an accounting emphasis. She continued in school to obtain her transfer degree and had one semester to go when "I just couldn't do it anymore," she reflects. "I was too sick and too tired. My thinking was scrambled and I was stressed about money. So I left and didn't go back. Then I thought I need to go back and finish what I started, as nothing else as a testament to (my dad). I just really needed to show him if you can do it, I can do it."

After her father's passing in 2005, Michelle went back to school in August and graduated in December with a transfer degree and was accepted at Chadron. She graduates in December 2007 with a bachelor's degree in psychology and a minor in business. Doctors are amazed at her college success. They find it hard to understand how she can even study with the complications of MS.

"What's really cool," she beams, "is I have a Phi Theta Kappa tuition waiver. They waived my tuition at Chadron because I was Phi Theta Kappa and USA All Academic. That was a God-send, and because I live on disability I did qualify for a Pell Grant." And just when she was about to run out of Pell Grant eligibility, Michelle was awarded a Jeanette Rankin Foundation Scholarship. "I was so humbled. I just couldn't believe it. God takes care of us; He really does."

Michelle wants to continue her education and get a masters degree in community counseling, a career she's well qualified for, having worked with rape and domestic abuse victims. Her main goal is to be a good voice for the people who don't know what to say or a voice for people who simply need an advocate. She's also been applauded as a motivational speaker, focusing on breaking the silence and about self-forgiveness: "It's okay to say I screwed up and that I have scars, and I'll sport my scars proudly because I put up a good fight and I'm free."

Michelle's children have carried on the family values. Zachary recently voiced to his mother his gratefulness that he was raised in a family with "such great work ethics."

"And something I've learned from my situation is that Zachary will never put his hands on a woman and my daughter is already going through rape and domestic advocacy training, so when she's 18 she can work the crisis line. She will never be in an abusive relationship," Michelle stated.

Zachary is 19 now and working hard at a good job, helping his mother voluntarily with finances however he can. Daughter Ellen is a sophomore in high school. Although disability helps, the struggles persist on a daily basis.

Much of it, she feels, has to do with the child support laws. "My ex-husband drives truck for a living. If you're not paying child support they could take your license. How are you going to pay child support then? A while back he paid \$150. We have a girl getting ready for prom, she needs a dress and everything that girls need to get ready for prom. It will take about all that just to get her what she needs with nothing left over."

What this single mom also finds frustrating about the child support system in Nebraska is that they charge interest. "My ex-husband's federal return has been garnished the last two to three years and my daughter doesn't see any of that, no matter if you're on current support or not. We have to hope and wait and hope that (her dad) will pay whatever he can or will."

But even with what life has dealt, Michelle's humor and positive attitude still shines through. "Some days it's hard to just get up from the couch. My knees are getting worse and my mobility is beginning to diminish from the MS. I thought about putting my couch on cinderblocks and someone told me that would look so tacky. I said, who am I trying to impress?" she laughs.

As for the future: "I've always been blessed to figure it out one day at a time," she says with confidence. "Feeling sorry for yourself is so unproductive."