



On March 2, 2012, an ordinary storm brewed in the small town of Henryville, Indiana. It was average. Nothing to be alarmed about. Stephanie Decker and her husband Joe continued on with life as usual.

They brought the kids to school, went to work. But as the day pushed on and reports grew more ominous, it seemed this ordinary storm might become something far more extraordinary: a tornado packing more than 175 mph winds. Stephanie left work, picked up her two young children—Dominic, 8, and Reese, 5—and headed home. When they reached the four-way stop five miles from the house, sirens blared. It was time to get inside. She rushed home, got her kids into the basement and watched the impending news reports on the floor above them.

At 2:45 p.m., tornadoes were spotted in the area and residents were warned to take cover immediately. Stephanie went to the basement, threw a comforter over her children, and shielded them with her body. Windows vibrated. The house shook. The foundation cracked and came apart. When the bricks started falling, Stephanie shifted her position—still holding onto her children—so the debris would hit her and not them.

As the house collapsed around them, Stephanie's mind raced: My kids haven't had a chance to live yet. They're only children. There's nothing I can do. We're going to die. I'm only 38.

first person

with **Stephanie Decker**

by Erin Kelly

First Person is a monthly Q&A that features compelling people who excel in their chosen endeavors. Ideas for future Q&As? Email edit@thriveswla.com.



"It was devastating, overwhelming and utterly terrifying," she says.

Ultimately, they survived. But not unscathed. The debris crushed Stephanie and left her motionless, bleeding, and in critical condition. When the tornado was gone—just as quickly as it arrived—she told Dominic and Reese, both of whom were unharmed, to find help.

Stephanie ultimately had both of her legs amputated.

She recently shared her harrowing experience with *Thrive*.

Who was Stephanie Decker before this experience, and who is she today?

Before Stephanie was your typical wife and mom of two kids. I toted kids around to school, ball practices, cooked supper, checked homework, went to the gym. Nothing out of the ordinary for the average household of 4.2 (have to include the dog). It was a very selfish, me-centered life as I look back on it. I'll go into that in a minute. After the tornado is a different story. Wow, have my eyes been opened. I appreciate the smallest things that were never on my radar before. My husband and I could not be closer, my kids I cherish every day. Don't get me wrong, I loved and lived for my kids, but after what we went through I CHERISH my kids. It can all be taken away in the blink of an eye and there could be no tomorrow. That is profound for me, for us. That is life-changing. I no longer worry about the messy house because if it can't get done, it can't get done. I no longer worry if I am on the PTO, or if my kid was absent and missed a big assignment because the lessons in life—the real world—have taught me those are not the things that are important. Now, why was I selfish? Because I was. Simple enough. I thought about me, my two kids and my husband and not much outside of that. How wrong could I be? There is a whole world out

there that needs help and what have I been doing? Nothing. Here was my chance, our second chance — not only life but about another chance at living. That meant another chance at giving. We had an opportunity to really help people, and shame on us if we didn't use what we were given to make a difference.

What have you learned about yourself?

I always knew I was a pretty tough cookie, but after this experience I discovered what I was made of. I discovered that my entire life has been training for this particular moment. I was preparing and getting ready for the test of a lifetime on March 2, I just didn't know about it. It was a "pop quiz." Everything in my life led me to this moment and I found out what true resilience really is all about. It's one thing to survive a tornado, but it's another thing to become something greater than when you started. I couldn't just talk the talk, I had to walk the walk—literally, too. I had to do it for myself, I had to do it for my children (I just couldn't preach all of those things to them about being tough and being strong, I had to DO it). I had to for my husband and my marriage. I had to for a community and for a nation. I had to because I wanted to be better and greater than where I started.

In what ways has this experience changed your perspective?

Those who I love are priceless. When you almost die and lose your children, it changes who you are. It changes the priorities in your life and even three years later my priorities are still where they should be. God, family and my country. And even though I have not fought in any wars, I am fighting to help others who need a voice. The rest takes care of itself.



In what ways has this experience changed you as a mother?

I don't sweat the little things; it's just not worth it. Time is too precious, time is too short. I still remind my husband to take the time to enjoy the kids. Don't worry about the yard, or the garage that needs to get cleaned up, relax and enjoy it because you never know when it will be gone and you will live with that regret the rest of your life. It's one thing I think I will always carry with me and will never change. I take the time to smell the roses now and I wouldn't change it for a minute.

It's easy to take daily activities for granted when your health or livelihood isn't compromised. What are some of the little things that you realized you took for granted?

Big change when you wake up and try to put your feet down to go the bathroom and they're not there! Ha! When your legs begin to hurt from the prosthetics but yet you still have to get the grocery shopping done. When there is no place to park and you have to walk a mile to get into the store and your body sometimes is just unforgiving and it hurts. When you go to a hotel and you ask for handicap accessible and their version doesn't include a way for you to take a shower because you don't have legs anymore. When you try to get on a sidewalk and the pavement is eaten away or destroyed and you wonder how does anyone in a wheelchair get across this? The answer is they can't. When, when, when. There are so many "whens," not just for me but for others who can't be as mobile as I am. I realized all of it WHEN I lost my legs and the whens could go on forever.



When you look back over the past three years, what are your proudest moments?

Love this question -- but I have a few proud moments, many of which have to do with my two amazing kids and amazing husband. I am so proud of how my children have overcome this tragedy in their lives and have found a passion and an appreciation for life and for others. I couldn't have taught that life lesson without having what happened to me.

I am so proud of my husband for being the glue that has held us altogether. He may call me the rock of the family but he is the glue, he stepped up and continues to step up in a big way by being a leader in this family and taking an awfully heavy load for a very long time. I am also pretty proud I married someone like him, a tragedy like this will either bring a marriage together or tear it apart. He loves me with or without legs, he thinks I am sexy with or without them on. He truly is the epitome of what the word "husband" stands for, and I think I did a pretty damn good job of picking him! Ha!

Many other proud moments along the way, setting goals on this journey and working to achieve them. Walking with the President and bending his ear to change laws (which we have) and to make available the best prosthetics that our military had available to our civilians. I was one of the first recipients of this new prosthetic, and now firefighters, EMT, and police officers have this fabulous technology that allows them to have their lives back! Pretty proud moment. I think my favorite is the Stephanie Decker Foundation.

What have been your greatest challenges—physical, spiritual or emotional?

I think for me the greatest challenges come from within. My attitude really hasn't changed; I was going to conquer this. I had no doubt. But I wanted it sooner rather than later. Patience is not one of my strong suits. I wanted to be able to walk in these contraptions two days before I even had them. But that wasn't going to happen. The process is long, hard, painful and frustrating—however, very rewarding in the end. I had so many other inspiring people ahead of me that I could look at and go,

"I will do that." I just didn't like having to wait for it. So I guess you would consider "patience" in the emotional category, otherwise, emotionally, I feel wonderful. Life goes on, we have struggles, bumps in the road, we get tested. For me, fortunately, I must have passed the test because I am still here on this Earth and I get to raise two beautiful kids and be with a pretty good dude for the rest of my life. I don't have nightmares or PTSD from the tornado, and neither do my kids. I feel pretty fortunate for that. Spiritually, I am sound. How could I not be? I am alive! Physically, well, as I tell kids that like to come up to me and see my cool legs, "My dad is robot and my mom is human, so I am half robot half human." And that, ladies and gentlemen, is pretty dang cool to a 5-year-old!

Tell me about the Stephanie Decker Foundation. What do you hope to achieve? What does your ideal world look like?

Ooooooh, this is an easy one to talk about. My lofty goals are to make everyone in the world know about amputees and make what was once a silent struggle a topic of discussion. I hope to help all children in this world who are limb-different or different in anyway feel like they can do anything in this world. To give them the confidence and assurance to believe in themselves. Children are our future; they will make the difference in this world. If I can teach them the values of mental toughness, perseverance and believe my ideals that you can do anything you want, you have no limits, then I have achieved my goal. I hope along the way they learn a little about sports and athletics and we can teach them a thing or two. My goal is for all children to accept each other and even those who are limb-different. At the end of the day, those kids don't want to be different. They just want to be kids. They want to be like every other kid who goes out and rides their bike or shoot hoops. They don't want to be the kid that has one arm and can pitch. They want to be the kid who can pitch because he's a pitcher, not a kid who's different.



Changing perceptions. Bringing awareness. Fighting for technology. Changing laws. As you can see, we have our work cut out for us, but in the end, the reward is so sweet. I will end with this: Landis Sims, an 8-year-old quad amputee, came to me and said "I want to pitch." Landis loves baseball and he plays just like any other kid, even though he is missing both of his arms and legs. This kid is amazing! He can do anything and he wanted to pitch. So when he stepped up on the mound for the first time this fall, I watched him pitch. It was ... well, let's just say, priceless. (Deep breath here as he always brings tears to my eyes!) I am doing something right in a world where we hear about so much that is wrong.

