

Thankful to be alive

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by Elizabeth Cook

Staff writer

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On this upcoming turkey day, one St. Michael resident will be giving thanks to a laundry list of people and experiences she's gained in the past few years.

For JoAnne Funch part of realizing the value of family, friends and life in general came after a slew of unexpected deaths and sicknesses during 2005.

It first started in May when her mother became ill and suddenly passed away. Then in June of the same year, her husband, Allan, fell off a ladder and died from brain trauma. Shortly after, her sister-in-law was diagnosed with breast cancer and another close friend had a heart attack. Later that year her father was also diagnosed with prostate cancer.

Needless to say, 2005 was a tough year for Funch. But since then her outlook and actions on what it truly means to be alive have changed.

This year she will spend Thanksgiving with her family for the first time in more than 20 years. Even though Funch is a native-born Minnesotan, she moved to southern California at the age of 28. During that time she owned a promotions and marketing company with her late husband, which she still does part time, and in 2003 started a business called Circle of Strength, which sells inspirational gifts for women. With the company she also produces uplifting events for women and creates monthly newsletters sharing words of inspiration.

After the horrendous year of 2005, Funch really needed family support and decided to move back to the area in April 2007.

But it's been these hard times that really made her reflect on what's important in life and what she's grateful for.

Sharing these realizations is something Funch has done in the past two years by including some words of wisdom inside Christmas cards sent out to loved ones.

"What this taught me is really how to live life," she said.

One of the most important lessons she learned from the ordeal is to ask for help when it's needed, she said.

“Reaching out for help is huge,” she said. “I had to set my ego aside and say ‘I need help.’”

After learning to ask she quickly realized that people want to help, they just need the prompter.

“People do want to help,” Funch said. “They just need to be asked.”

She’s also learned to live a simpler life in a variety of ways. The first was downgrading her larger home in California to a smaller townhouse in St. Michael, and getting rid of all the material things she didn’t really need.

It’s also about appreciating each day. She said she now splurges on herself and no longer needs a special occasion to use the good dishes, buy the better bottle of wine or order whatever she wants at dinner.

“Every day that I’m alive is a special day,” she said.

Funch now fully embraces family and friends and recognizes their immeasurable importance, too.

“I know that we should spend as much time with our family and friends, get to know them deeply every day because it is in these people that our lives are framed and our innermost feelings are shared,” she wrote in one card and still believes in today.

The 2005 year was more about grieving, and 2006 was about healing, she said.

Funch said she used to work around the clock since she owned her own business, but since has learned it’s OK to stop working at a certain time.

“I quit work at 5 p.m. because more hours wouldn’t make my business better or more prosperous; it would just make me tired,” she said.

Others in her life have given her advice she’s held on to, like her father, who told her to learn to play the cards dealt in life

with dignity and grace.

In November, Funch's story and life lessons about dealing with grief were published in Hallmark Magazine.

"If something I can say can change one person's life, then it's worth it," she said.

In the end the one thing that can be told for sure is that death taught Funch about life.

"I am really grateful that I've learned how to live life in a more meaningful way," she said.

And that's why this Thanksgiving Funch is grateful for good health, friends, family, her cat Tara, a new home and the freedom to do the work she loves. She also gives thanks to all the little things like having dinner with her dad, enjoying time with a friend, or something as simple as hearing the birds chirp while sitting outside with a cup of coffee.

"People need to stop and do things with more joy, not because they're obligated," Funch said.