

Facing serious disease

Part 1 of two parts

By DEANNA BENDIX
STAFF WRITER

WASECA — For several years, Vonna Wala maintained a professional office on South State Street. She had also had offices in Faribault and Apple Valley.

Wala was midway into a 15-year career as a marriage and family therapist. She had acquired fully licensed status through the State of Minnesota just three years ago.

Recently, however, Wala was forced to close her office. She's not doing any counseling at all, and she's sad about it.

"It's a huge loss for me," Wala said. "I just loved it."

Four years ago she was diagnosed with a degenerative disease. She had hung on as long as she could, but finally the disease progressed to the point that it was interfering with her ability to do her job.

"The first symptom I had was that the left side of my body from my face all the way down to my feet had numbness, and I had a little trouble walking, Wala said.

She told herself that the numbness and her temporary loss of ambulatory capability was because she'd had a couple of back surgeries. She thought that perhaps the nerves on that side of her body had been damaged.

"I wanted it to go away; so I kind of ignored it," she said.

She also has polycystic kidney disease, which can cause brain tumors. "So, when I went to the clinic here in town I thought I might have a brain tumor."

From the local clinic Wala was sent to Immanuel-St. Joseph Hospital in Mankato for a brain examination to detect whether or not she had a tumor. She said, "A lot of me was hoping that's what it was."



County News/Deanna Bendix
Vonna Wala and the family dog Mandy, a border collie terrier from a pound in Mankato, are meeting the future together with the rest of the family. Four years ago Wala found out that she has multiple sclerosis, a progressive nerve disease.

When they scanned her brain, they didn't find anything.

Wala went home, and then her Mankato doctor told her, "I think you should go to Mayo."

"At Mayo they did these nasty tests," she recalled. The worst was a spinal tap. "They take a needle and stick it in your spine."

There were more tests for several days. She had a MRI, and blood tests to see whether the antibodies in her plasma were higher than normal. A probe with a live wire was used to check for electrical impulses to see whether her nerve speed was right.

"After all of this they said, 'You have *probable* multiple sclerosis.

As soon as they said this, Wala took it as "Yeah, you have it. It's just a matter of time."

The tests weren't conclusive,

and they told her there wasn't enough documentation to determine if she had MS. Until then, the possibility had not entered her head, but now she was convinced of it, even in the absence of a definitive diagnosis.

Wala explained that it can take a long time to diagnose MS, because there isn't just one test.

"It's a waiting game."

Before MS

Vonna graduated with a BA in social work from Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, and through a Christian employment agency got a job in a group home for mentally retarded in Redwood City, CA. She just loved it.

It was at this time that she met her husband, Phil, at Bible study. He was finishing up his doctorate at Stanford.

Today, Phil works at ADC Technologies in Waseca. He initially came here when he was hired by the E.F. Johnson Co. as a principal electrical engineer. Vonna says her husband has designed several award winning products.

Meanwhile, she had left her job in California and taken a job in Rock Valley, IA. She also worked on her master's degree in counseling via video through Liberty University in Virginia.

She subsequently attended St. Mary's Institute of Marriage and Family in Minneapolis, had an internship at the Association in Psychiatry and Psychology and has had years of ongoing education with a family therapy training specialist.

In 1983, she and Phil were married. They have two children, Jeremiah, 15, and Stephanie, 12, and have lived in Waseca for nearly 20 years.

Disneyworld exhaustion

In Disneyworld in December of 1999, Vonna spent their family vacation sitting by in exhaustion while her husband and children went on all the rides.

Ultimately, she gave up and retreated to the hotel room. She decided to enjoy reading and relaxing. Fatigue would soon become a central factor of her life.

In January 2000, Wala really got sick. "I had severe pain in my right eye. I couldn't see well. It was pretty discouraging."

She went to a local optometrist, and he sent her to Dr. Adam, a neurologist at the Noran Clinic. She learned that she had optic neuritis.

The doctor told her, "This would be the confirmation that you have MS."

Even though Wala already believed she had MS, that finite statement made her feel "a little crazy."

She tried to think how she could break the news to the people that she knew. How was she going to tell them that the reason she was so weak and was walking funny was because she had MS?

Next: MS today for Vonna

MS today for Vonna Wala

Part 2 of two parts

By DEANNA BENDIX
STAFF WRITER

WASECA --- Vonna Wala recently ended a 15-year career as a



WALA

marriage therapist and counselor because multiple sclerosis made it impossible for her to do her job.

The other day Wala was feeling "real good," having just gotten done with chemo.

She also takes anti-depressants, and it makes a huge difference in her mood.

She has taken steroid IVs periodically in the past, which speeds her body up. It doesn't work well for her. It should last for quite a while, but for her, she's sliding by the fifth day. Initially, though, she's higher than a kite. Her heart is racing and she talks fast. "I'm the Energizer Bunny," Wala said.

She is just starting to recognize that some of her symptoms don't subside anymore.

She now has what is called "secondary progressive" MS which can be expected to progress without remission.

Wala has trouble walking off and on. The numbness even causes her tongue to be numb. She particularly has trouble swallowing pills.

She also has optic neuritis off and on; which means the nerve behind her eye twitches severely. She takes medication to relax the nerve and make it less painful. If she's having eye trouble, she said, "I'd be seeing two of you." Sleep is not always easy to come by, because, "it just hurts." She has "dancing legs," which means her nerves are twitching.

Her arms and fingertips ache. Sometimes her face hurts so bad, she has to put ice on it.

Wala said, occasionally she feels like "a bowl full of jelly." She has to tell her husband, "Honey, I

can't walk."

Wala can't always get the words out. Trains of thought sometimes get lost. She finds phone numbers hard to recall and the spellings of occasional obvious words escape her.

"The trouble is, your brain just doesn't work," Wala said.

Before Wala gave up her office, she would get her kids off to school, sleep, see clients in her office, come home, sleep and then see people again at night.

"The fatigue is absolutely the worst. It's hard to describe. It's like you can't move. Your body is a dead weight."

Wala says it's a delicate balance. If she pushes herself too far, she pays the price for the next two or three days. She has to pick and choose what to do.

That's what she did when she closed her office. She chose to be with her family and not be sleeping all the time when they were home.

Wala has been turning to God for a long time in her life, and she is particularly interested in a "theophostic" method of counseling. With this approach, Wala said, she has seen sad and crying clients incredibly transformed from shaking and crying to peace in fifteen minutes. She would like to teach this God-centered approach to counseling to others.

What about the future?

Wala says they need to find another house that's all on one level. Their multi-level residence is no longer easily negotiable for her.

She is looking into writing children's books, which would deal with some of the tough problems kids have to deal with, such as what it's like to have a parent who's sick. (This was true of Wala's own upbringing.)

Working with puppets and clowning with her church are continuing interests for her. As a clown, she goes by the name "Hoppy," an appropriate moniker for someone with a sometimes twitching body.

An electric wheelchair would be a boon to Wala so she could be more independent. Nobody would have to push her, and she could be outside more, something she loves.

"If I had the wheelchair, I could tool around town shopping," she said.

Wala's firm faith in God is definitely helping her right now. And she certainly hasn't lost her sense of humor.

She knows that "Vonna" the name her mother gave her, combined with her married name "Wala" makes some people laugh when they first hear it.

"Vonna Wala," she said, smiling. "It sounds like a tropical drink."