



YWCA
EDMONTON

A TURNING POINT
FOR WOMEN

Until I Met Olga

Shannon Kernaghan

I was twenty and my dreams were just beginning to take shape. Until then, death and illness had never played a major part in my life. Until I met Olga.

Olga was my first physically challenged friend. Although restricted to a wheelchair, her positive outlook amazed me. As the months passed and our outings became more frequent, Olga shared her story, full of suffering.

Although she was an intelligent young woman, her family grew tired of caring for a teenager with the special needs of cerebral palsy. They institutionalized her. Olga spent several despairing years surrounded by people with different requirements until a new nurse started working there, one from Olga's old neighbourhood. The nurse helped Olga find more suitable care.

As an adult, Olga fought to remain independent. Only months after enjoying life in her first apartment, a man broke in and raped her. The violent attack caused injuries that would confine her to a wheelchair for the rest of her life.

Her health deteriorated. First, a foot was amputated; next, her doctor diagnosed a serious heart problem. Her existence was marred with one debilitating condition after another.

I asked her at what point she lost hope.

"Lost it?" she said, her speech slurred. "I never lost it. Instead, I feel thankful for the good days, the days without pain."

Decades have passed since meeting my friend but I've never forgotten her or her strength. Not once did she expect sympathy; if anything, she was interested in my experiences and celebrated my successes.

Throughout her daily pain, she found the strength to love people and respect life. I'll never know if she realized how much her courage influenced my own view of the world. Olga reminded me to find joy in small moments, and to live each day as if it's an exceptional gift.

Author: *Shannon Kernaghan*

