

Sara McCracken, 52, adjusts her goggles and bends her head over the steel mesh table. Sparks fly from the arc of her weld. Sara has learned just how much heat is needed to merge two metals. The analogy to the convergence of her old life as a physician, and her new one as an artist—is not lost on Sara. Like a phoenix, the life she’s leading—a life she loves—emerged from the “fire” of a breast cancer diagnosis.

Sixty miles away, Jeff McCabe, 47, drops a line into the water of his backyard pond in Brown County, Indiana. “A bad day of fishin’ is better than a good day at work, right buddy?” he asks his dog, who barks back at him playfully, and runs around the dock.

In 2001, Jeff was a self-described “gladiator of corporate America,” a high-profile executive who rarely had downtime with his wife and children. Now he’s home full-time, making goals like the one he set last year—to do more fishing in a single year than he had done all of the preceding years of his life.

Sara and Jeff have never met, but they share the experience of an epiphany—a wake-up call that compelled them to shift their directions in life.

Sara and Jeff know that life can change in an instant, and both of them have a mandate to live for the moment, whatever the cost or sacrifice.

Sara McCracken wore a white dress to work the day of her diagnosis. She remembers because later that day, her daughter spilled a Coke down the front of it, and Sarah didn’t yell. It didn’t seem important.

The day started normally. The wife and mother of three children, ages 4, 7, and 9, had the nanny take the children to school, as always.

Sarah got to Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis early, where she ran the breast radiology center. She’d had her own routine mammogram six months earlier, and everything was fine. But she’d recently felt a small, pinpoint lump in her breast, so during a slow moment, Sara and a technician ran some scans.

“It blew me away,” Sara remembers. One look and she knew.

She had five nodes. Tests later revealed an aggressive form of cancer.

“All day, as part of my job, I read results. I would say to my patients, ‘You come in here, and you’re thinking, ‘Did I defrost the dinner? Did I buy toilet paper?’ And I hit you over the head with a sledgehammer—a diagnosis—and none of that matters anymore. I was aware of that on a daily basis. But it still comes as a shock when it’s your own.”

She left the breast center at noon and never came back.

Her first thought went to her children. “I remember thinking, ‘I’m not going to live to see them graduate. I’m not going to be there to help my daughters pick out their prom dresses.’”

Then she thought about herself. “I honestly didn’t know if I still existed.

I was just so shriveled emotionally from the life I was leading. I felt like a husk. I remember thinking, ‘Oh my Lord. I’m going to die, and I never feel as though I’ve ever really lived authentically.’ ”

Sara underwent a bilateral mastectomy and an aggressive campaign of chemotherapy and radiation, vowing to fight the cancer. As she regained her strength, she began driving her children to school, and taking part in their activities.

“I’ll never forget when my youngest, who was just 4, said, ‘Mom, I wish you’d gotten cancer earlier. It’s so much nicer now because we can do things together.’ ”

As chemotherapy wracked her body, a cancer support group helped Sara build her spirit. She took up painting, and discovered she loved it. She then began to study sculpture.

“If I’m welding, I’m not thinking about dying. I’m thinking about the weld. I found that I’m just so much more alive when I do my art.”

Sara, a single mother, downsized, moving with the kids to a much smaller house and a simpler lifestyle.

She’s been cancer-free for eight years. Her daughter, Charlotte, now 16, is among her many admirers.

“She saw things in her life that she needed to change and did it. I’ll be much more aware of that in my own life as a result. She’s an example to me.”

Sara has come to see her cancer in a new way. “I was given the gift of cancer. It did change my life, and for the better. I always heard the axiom, ‘We need to be true to ourselves.’ I never understood that as a kid, but it means you have to have a congruent life.”

For Sara, cancer was the spark to weld a new life of meaning and joy.

Jeff McCabe’s transformation began on a day of national mourning in America, September 11th, 2001. Jeff, his wife, September, and their three children lived in Atlanta, Georgia, but they had just purchased land in Brown County, Indiana, for their retirement someday.

That “someday” came sooner than they ever expected.

McCabe, then a top executive for American Express, was scheduled to be in a meeting September 11th at the company’s offices at the World Trade Center, but was called away to Brown County by the excavator digging their pond. He’d arranged to do the meeting by conference call and was on the phone when the planes hit the twin towers.

“I actually had co-workers in the building who didn’t know what was going on. They saw the confetti of paper in the sky and wondered whether there was a parade.”

The events of September 11th became a catalyst for Jeff to examine his life.

For years he had traveled extensively for work and rarely had time to attend his children’s sporting events. He began to feel the weight of what he’d missed. He and September opted to move up the schedule of their retirement by several years.

Now McCabe is the ultimate “guy on the sidelines.” He never misses a football practice or game of his 16-year-old son, Ian. The family moved to a large log cabin outside of Nashville, Indiana, one-third the size of their former home in Georgia.

McCabe fishes every morning and has taken on some new part-time vocations. He's a cabin builder, a volunteer fireman, and an innkeeper, with the freedom to pick and choose his hours. Jeff and September bought a bed and breakfast in Nashville.

Jeff likens his change in pace to his 1963 Ford pickup truck, with its manual transmission and no power steering or power brakes.

"I can't go very fast in it; it's not safe. Before, I used to push it, and I was a menace to society on the roads. I didn't have the patience to drive the truck the right way. Now, if those cars want to pile up behind me and tailgate, I just let them."

His wife is still trying to adjust to having her husband "underfoot," but says the change has been good for their family. "September 11th has made me realize that nothing we have is really ours. It's all a gift from God, and every day I am thankful."