



Gwen Arrington - The Phoenix

She'd dreamed of it before it happened – a recurring nightmare. Her husband was there. She was there. And there was fire.

It was late on May 27, 1989. Gwen Arrington had taken the bus home from work. Her husband, Al, was asleep inside their rental house on Cleveland's East Side. She could smell the gas as she approached the front door. She ran upstairs to wake him and they hurried down the stairs. She made it to the landing, her husband trailing behind her, when the house exploded.

For Gwen, the next few seconds felt like hours. The entire house was on fire. She was on fire. Her acrylic nails and chemically treated hair ignited. Her knee-highs melted to the skin on her ankles and the tops of her feet. Once outside the house, she couldn't understand why fire and rescue hadn't yet arrived. She started walking to the pay phone to call 911, using the crosswalk at East 93rd Street and following the traffic signals, confused as to why neighbors looked at her so strangely. Understanding Gwen's shock, one approached her, letting her know that 911 had been called and gently guiding her back to what had been her house.

The Arringtons were transported to MetroHealth.

Gwen's husband suffered first- and second-degree burns on his torso and arms. Gwen had been severely burned on her neck, head and face, around her waist, her legs, her hands. The tips of nine fingers would have to be amputated. The odds were against her making it through the night.

Nearly three weeks passed in MetroHealth's Burn Unit before Gwen looked at herself in a mirror. Her reflection was that of a stranger. Just 22 at the time of the fire, she'd never thought of herself as vain. Yet, with nothing but time to think, she wondered if she was being punished somehow for being prideful about her appearance.

By the end of June, Al was discharged from the hospital.

A couple weeks later, it was Gwen's turn to go home. But because she needed full-time care both for herself and her then 18-month-old daughter, Gwen moved in with her parents. When they'd encourage their granddaughter to go to her mother, the toddler would become confused, even afraid. She'd point to Gwen and say, "You're not my mommy. My mommy's in the hospital." Gwen understood the child's pain. She didn't recognize herself, either.

She wore a compression mask that covered everything but her eyes. Her hair began to grow back. She underwent skin grafts to replace the lost tissue and plastic surgery to repair some of the scarring. After her 30th surgery, Gwen stopped keeping count.

During this same time, she enrolled at Dyke College. She pulled a 3.28 GPA in paralegal studies and earned her bachelor's degree in 1997, the same year she gave birth to her second child, a daughter. After graduation, she wanted to return to work but worried about how a 10-year gap in her resume



would look. In early 1998, she got to explain it during a phone interview with Progressive Insurance. She's worked there ever since— a licensed agent before being promoted to the legal department as a consumer relations specialist in October 2016.

Gwen's two youngest children, unlike her eldest daughter, don't know their mother without her scars. In December 2015, she earned a master's degree in special education – maintaining a 3.74 GPA this time – and volunteers for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, serving on its customer service committee and helping other parents advocate for their children's public school experience. While she'd always written poetry, she's now working on publishing a book of her work when she's not spending time with her grandchildren.

Gwen holds herself to higher expectations now than she did before the fire. While she may never know why this happened, she does know that the experience helped shape the person she's become. It's also given her a greater sense of compassion. She visits the burn unit at MetroHealth, knowing that some patients may gain new perspective, even new hope, just by seeing her scars and talking to someone whose experience may have been worse than their own.

"Maybe I had to go through this to be able to help people. They need to know that the grief doesn't last always ... it's just a moment," she says. "And while you don't let go of what happened, you do learn to live with it."

Three years after the fire, Gwen returned to the site for the first time. Nearly 30 years later, the lot, surrounded by fencing, remains empty. Gwen writes about this sacred ground and her experience in her poem **Baptism of Fire**:

Fire typically destroys anything in its path;
Leaving you to deal with the aftermath.
It seemed as though I was swallowed in the flames;
But I called on my heavenly Father who still reigns.
To me He extended His hand;
For not even fire could destroy His plan.
He knew it wouldn't be an easy task;
It would even require that I wear a mask.
I would have to endure great pain and hurt
But He needed me to go through this for my rebirth.
So He placed me back in my mother's hands;
To feed me, bathe me, and to help me stand.

He loved me so much He made sure she was there;
Because what I needed required love and total care.
She nursed me to the next phase;
Eventually I learned to give Him praise.
This has been a long hard road;
And it has definitely taken a toll,
But there's so many souls that He needs to touch;
Others that He loves just as much.
So He prepared me to be received;
So that others could believe.
He also needed me to understand,
The pain and feeling of another man.
He lifted me from the mire;
By a Baptism of Fire.

