

After the first set of stabilizers, Bill and Jeanie McCormick knew they needed to reevaluate their options. The second stabilizer set on Bill's knees had a 20 percent chance of success.

"Here we are, 60 years old, thinking we could wait a year, get something that could only last five to seven years, and then amputate it," Jeanie said.

They ultimately decided to amputate Bill's right leg below the knee. Bill was already having difficulties with his leg due to a staph infection.

"Bill didn't last two months without putting weight on it," Jeanie said. "We figured we had a better chance learning to walk on the prosthetic leg now."

Jeanie, an instructor at Ropes ISD, said they both just tried to manage after the operation. She said that balancing aftereffects of surgery with their day-to-day lives was a challenge.

"There was a couple of weeks in the hospital," Jeanie said. "Bill was on a lot of drugs, but he was depressed and angry.

"Missing two to three days a week—sometimes a full week of class—was very difficult."

She said the prospect of dealing with an amputation was

initially very daunting. She said if they had known all the potential hazards, they would have been more hesitant.

"I think we were both almost in shock-traumatized, overwhelmed," Jeanie said. "We just didn't know what to expect."

Bill said keeping up with everything was a vital part of the process. He said knowledge of further developments kept him from regressing.

"You've got to keep up," Bill said, "because if you don't, you'll wither."

After his stay in the hospital, Bill was moved to a rehabilitation center. Jeanie said friends and family in the area helped him through that time.

"Both of our daughters were there; good friends were there," Jeanie said. "They were wonderful to him."

She said Bill does not talk openly about his time in the rehabilitation center.

"I can only imagine how lonely, depressed and scared he had to be," Jeanie said.

Denette Vaughn, an attorney for Disability Rights Texas, says that people with disabilities often feel isolated from society.

Jeanie said that while their friends were helpful when

it came to Bill being sick or in the hospital, some of them did not know how to handle the day-to-day challenges Bill faced.

After Bill was able to return home, the couple searched for a physical therapist. Jeanie said their first physical therapist was not as effective as they had hoped.

"I think he just didn't know how to handle Bill," Jeanie said.

She said their second physical therapist was more successful by allowing Bill to mimic household tasks, such as sweeping the floor.

"This lady got him on two canes, then one, and then had him use a broom," Jeanie said.

Although Bill was making gradual progress, he still tired very quickly. He said that it takes 60 percent more energy to use an artificial limb than a regular limb.

Bill said below-the-knee amputees retain more control than above-the-knee amputees.

"You can't believe the function the knee has; for people amputated above the knee, it's much more difficult," Bill said, gesturing to his artificial leg. "Below-the-knee amputees retain the ability to step and balance."

Jeanie said while Bill is taking steps toward

independence, she still struggles to rein in her protective impulses.

"You want them to try and do it themselves, but you're scared they're going to get hurt," Jeanie said. "It's a balance between letting the amputee do it themselves and being stuck in bed with another broken limb."

She said they were not expecting the rehabilitation process to be so gradual.

"I think I'm surprised at how long it takes to make very small increments of progress.

"Independence—first to be able to get out of the bed, the bed to a wheelchair, the wheelchair to the toilet," Jeanie said.

After some initial reluctance, Bill joined the Lubbock Area Amputee Support Group. He said that attending meetings allows him to gain some perspective on the situation.

"A very positive thing, no matter who you are, you realize that you're not alone," Bill said.

Jeanie said the support group has also been a good source of information.

Primarily, not knowing potential dangers helped Bill and Jeanie through a rough transition period. However, Jeanie said the couple likes to stay informed these days.

"We're fortunate to live in a time where disabilities are addressed in so many different ways," Jeanie said. "We're more aware of it now."

Both are optimistic that Bill will make further progress with his mobility. Jeanie said realizing that the physical therapy exercises have real-world applications has motivated Bill to work harder.

"It's exciting right now because he's to the point where he sees these things are possible," Jeanie said. "If he works at it, I think he'll be able to walk 85 to 90 percent of the time, eventually."

Bill said although the process can be difficult at times, he is determined to reach his full potential as an amputee.

"The only decision you can make is, 'They're not going to kill me. I'm going to fight back,'" Bill said.

Service journalism:

Lubbock Area Amputee Support Group

- Meets second Tue. of each month
- 6 to 7:30 p.m.
- Call 806-748-5870 for meeting location
- For more information, visit <http://www.laasg.org>

Source: "H.O.P.E: Helping Others, Providing Encouragement," a brochure published by Lubbock Area Amputee Support Group.