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Highline's Superstudents

Judy Eckland battled lupus and cancer to achieve her dreams

By Rochelle Adams
Staff Reporter

Judith L. Eckland is a self proclaimed "miracle of modern medicine" and that's no exaggeration.

This paralegal student, who will graduate next week, has survived lupus, a fatal disease that causes the body to turn against itself by killing healthy tissue.

"As a child I was told that I probably wouldn't live to be an adult," Eckland said. "Wrong!"

She is currently in remission and feels healthier than she's ever been.

Though her body is no longer under attack from the disease, it wasn't always that way.

When Eckland was in junior high she was diagnosed with cancer in her throat.

"Radiation and chemotherapy successfully vanquished my throat cancer at age 15," she said.

Unfortunately, the radiation scarred her around the trachea. Lupus multiplied the effects of the scarring, causing her throat to close until it had "the diameter of an upholstery needle."

This latest tragedy forced her to give up the activities she loved such as ballet and bike riding as well as normal human functions like crying and what she refers to as "that delicious sensation they call 'topping your breath.'"

What finally helped her was a tracheotomy, a surgical procedure on the neck to open a direct airway through an incision in the windpipe.

"Breathing was pure joy," Eckland said. "The air went in and out that hole in my neck like nothing."

For 12 years, she breathed easy with the hole in her neck (the trach), but she eventually gave it up in favor of a new passion: the stage.

"I had fallen like a brick for the world of acting," she said.

This career path required her to use her vocal chords so that meant no more trach.

Four doctors tried and failed to help her close the hole in her neck. The fifth doctor proved to be the charm.

A new throat was made for her using a part of her rib. This new throat isn't as good as a real throat because it doesn't have the reinforcing circles that stop a real throat from collapsing. Still it allowed her to pursue acting which the hole in her neck had made inconvenient.

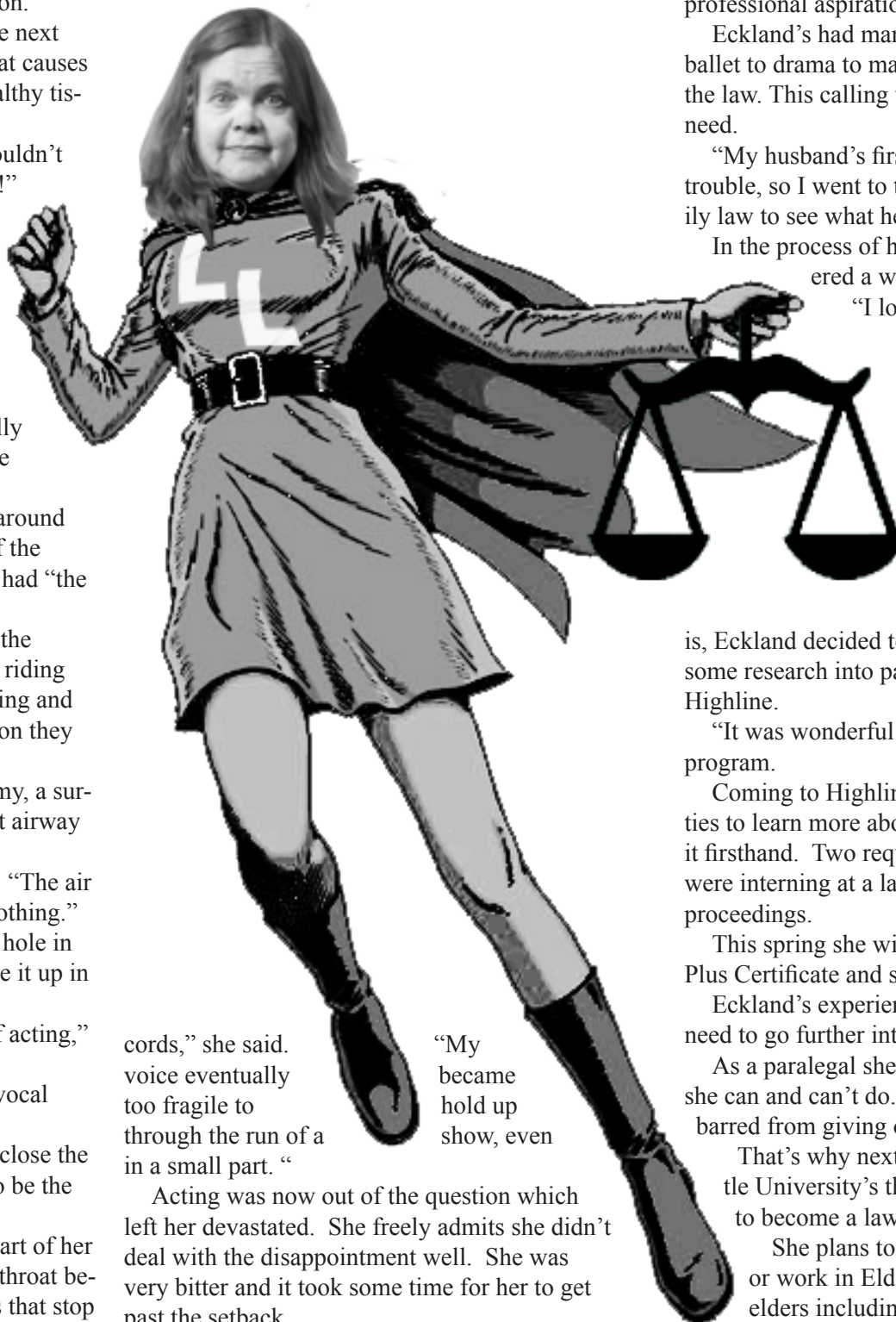
With the regained ability to bring air through her vocal chords, Eckland thought she was ready for the next step in her path to becoming an actress.

She relocated from California to Seattle where she became a University of Washington student.

Despite the surgery and the big move, Eckland still couldn't attain her dream.

"It should have occurred to me that the radiation that had caused my trachea to constrict, would probably have had some kind of effect on my vocal

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cords," she said. voice eventually too fragile to through the run of a in a small part. "

Acting was now out of the question which left her devastated. She freely admits she didn't deal with the disappointment well. She was very bitter and it took some time for her to get past the setback.

One thing that helped her was throwing her attention into another school subject.

"I escaped into the sane, rational, unemotional, and delightfully intricate puzzle called math," Eckland said.

She graduated from the University of Washington with a bachelor's degree in Pure Math as well as one in Drama.

She then became a math tutor at Seattle Central Community College as part of a program where she would work with low income, disabled, and first-generation college students. They were targeted by the program because those types of students are sta-

"My became hold up show, even

tistically the ones who need the most help, she said.

Many of them were international students from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Central America.

"For them, learning math in English is doubly difficult especially given the variation of English language usage peculiar to mathematicians," Eckland said.

She found the experience extremely rewarding and is still in contact with some of the students she helped.

While still enjoying her work as a math tutor, she soon found yet another professional aspiration.

Eckland's had many passions in her life from ballet to drama to math. Her newest one has been the law. This calling was stumbled onto by personal need.

"My husband's first wife decided to give him trouble, so I went to the library and delved into family law to see what he could do about it," she said.

In the process of helping her spouse, she discovered a whole new passion to pursue.

"I love the law," she said. "It's a perfect blend of math and drama. It has a defined space that you work within and try to prove things. But it's not just abstract; it's about people and the important stories in their lives."

After realizing how high the tuition for law schools is, Eckland decided to become a paralegal. She did some research into paralegal programs and found Highline.

"It was wonderful!" she said when describing the program.

Coming to Highline gave her many opportunities to learn more about the law and experiencing it firsthand. Two requirements for the program were interning at a law firm and attending live court proceedings.

This spring she will have finished her Paralegal Plus Certificate and she couldn't be happier.

Eckland's experience here has only fueled her need to go further into the law.

As a paralegal she will be restricted as to what she can and can't do. Unlike lawyers, she will be barred from giving official legal advice.

That's why next year she will be joining Seattle University's three-year program and working to become a lawyer.

She plans to be a criminal defense lawyer or work in Elder law, laws specifically for elders including abuse and wills.

Though she has big plans, Eckland stays realistic in her pursuits because of the lupus she still has, though it is in remission.

"I certainly could not be a stereotypical, overworked, rookie lawyer," she said. "Lupus holds a stop-watch to my energy, which stays fine until it runs out. If I persist, I become nauseous and dizzy, and my joints swell. For that reason, I have almost always worked part time."

Part-time lawyers are a rarity but she still plans on making it work. After all, this is the same "miracle of modern medicine" who survived lupus, cancer, and dashed dreams.