

Article Last Updated: 06/22/2006 02:06:25 PM MDT

She helps others despite her pain

Pain doesn't stop her from helping others

By Kathryn Jones
Close-Up Correspondent

Michelle Higham, accounting business manager for the Salt Lake Chamber of Commerce and Downtown Alliance, manages to stay active even though she copes with daily physical pain.

It started at 16 when her joints started aching. Later, she found out she had a genetic disorder, ankylosing spondylitis, a disease characterized by chronic inflammation of the spine and joints. Higham also has been diagnosed with gastroparesis, a stomach disorder.

"It wouldn't be so bad if I had just one thing," she said, "but my stomach doesn't digest food and that's what's killing me lately."

With illness can come depression.

"You really have to think positive and force yourself to do [things]," she said.

But her physical maladies have not kept her from being accomplished. At 18, she taught math in a high school community education program.

She also worked as a computer lab instructor, honing her skills for use in the job she holds today.

She became a writer, sold a book and spent time teaching community education classes at Granger High School.

About five years ago the Salt Lake Chamber of Commerce merged with the Downtown Alliance.

"People on both sides are great," she said.

Her duties include taking care of the financial end of First Night, the annual community New Year's Eve celebration and the Farmer's Market and Craft Market.

When Higham isn't working, she enjoys spending time with her husband and two boys. They are her emotional and physical support, she said.

"Some days are better than others," she said, "but my lucky thing is [my husband] knows. My kids, they've helped a lot."

Recently, Higham received a series of injections that have helped with her mobility.

"Now I've got some quickness in my step. The injections are helping," she said.

Friend Sara

Fitzgerald said before the illness was so severe, her friend was always busy.

"She was always going a million miles an hour," Fitzgerald said.

These days, Higham focuses on learning from other people who have their own set of problems, especially technology-related problems.

"There's always people coming in to say, 'Help me fix my computer,' 'I need this checked,' 'Get this for me.' So it makes me feel, OK, I'm doing this to help other people. If I go downhill in health and help other people less, it will be hard," she said.

When she is no longer able to work, she plans to spend time painting and writing. She has already written one book, *Shelby's Plan*, published in 2001 and plans to write more, including one about a girl with ankylosing spondylitis.

"The hardest thing is getting up and going to work every morning, because you start over," she said. "Every night you [lie] down and get all stiff in the morning and you have to wake back up and stretch out. [But] I've watched other people go through things and you learn from them. They give me hope that, well, yeah, if I lose some of [my] capabilities, I'll make up for it by telling people what to do," she said.



Michelle Higham