An interview with Raija Heimonen, 2012 Stene Prize winner

Raija is a 54 year old woman who was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and Sjögren’s Syndrome in 2003.

She loves writing and was very excited to learn about the Stene Prize on the internet. She believes that real life stories can not only support other people in similar circumstances, but also help health professionals to gain a better understanding of their patients.

Raija graduated from Helsinki University after studying mathematics and natural sciences and today works full time as a leading planner in the business department of the pension insurance company, Tapioila. She is married with three children and, because of her husband’s profession working in the forestry industry, has spent many years living abroad in Sweden, Belgium and Estonia. She speaks Finnish, Swedish, English and Estonian fluently and is able to understand German and French.

Twelve years ago the family returned to their home in Finland and now lives in the city of Espoo, which is very close to Helsinki. Raija and her husband have two sons, 20 year old Hermanni and 16 year old Oskari and an adopted daughter, 18 year old Heta Kairit, from Estonia.

Raija is member of the local branch of the Finnish Rheumatism Association.

What did you think when you heard that your contribution had won the 2012 competition?

Raija: I was surprised and, of course, very happy to hear that my essay had been selected as the winner of the Stene Prize. I am very fond of stories and was so pleased that my story succeeded in conveying something important about everyday living with rheumatic diseases.

You have a wonderful sense of humour and a very inspiring attitude to dealing with challenges - what is your recipe for staying positive on a difficult day?

Raija: I think that everyone is given his or her own set of cards to play with in this life, so it is up to me to live my life with the cards I have been dealt. I had breast cancer 11 years ago. When I received that diagnosis I was also faced with the thought of death and it made me very conscious of the fact that I only have one life, and it’s here and now.

My two opponents can really make my day miserable. Those days my recipe to stay positive is ‘to count my blessings’. I beat my diseases into perspective. ‘Counting my blessings’ puts my diseases into perspective.

With a large family and a full time job, how do you manage to cope with all your daily demands - in particular when your children were younger?

Raija: Good question! Having a large family was not easy and automatic for me and my husband. We were married for 10 years before we had our first son. Two years later we adopted a daughter. And two years after that we were happy and surprised to have another son. So one day I found myself the mother of three children, all under school age!

Maybe the time spent hoping and waiting to have children gave me the right attitude and preparation for an active, lively, noisy, busy, colourful family life. I have learned to organise things. I don’t demand too high level of housework.

I prioritise my work, housework, children’s needs and hobbies, and my own time. Many of the household tasks and children’s activities are shared with my husband and sometimes grandparents also give us a helping hand with our everyday life.

I enjoy working in interesting IT-projects with my professional colleges. Even though my work is demanding, it also gives me the opportunity to just concentrate on my own things and thoughts. When I am dead tired and fall into my bed my last thoughts are on. ‘Counting my blessings’ puts my diseases into perspective.

You had the opportunity to live abroad in many different countries which gave you insights into their different health and social systems. From your current perspective what is it that you most value about being back in Finland? Is there anything you miss, or where you feel the system could do better?

Raija: Living abroad has given me a perspective on my own country. I see that nowadays the standard of healthcare is high in most countries in Europe. Also, patients are much more informed about their diseases and medical treatments because of all the easily accessible sources of information. But I think that one of the most important things for a person who is diagnosed with a difficult disease is being able to communicate in your mother tongue. I can understand medical facts and ask questions in a foreign language, but I can only express my feelings perfectly in my native language. And faced with serious, chronic diseases, patients are full of feelings: fear, disbelief, despair, hate, anger.

I value very highly the Finnish health and social care systems: I have received healthcare very quickly and at a reasonable cost. I am also happy that I am able to discuss all the sensitive issues concerning my diseases in my native language. But I hope that in Finland, doctors and nurses will become even better trained to deal with the feelings and psychological stresses faced by their patients.

What do you love to do most on a good day when ‘Mr Rheumatism and Mr Sjögren’s’ lie defeated on the floor?

Raija: Those are the days when I am full of energy. I simply love to do extra things around the house and garden. I change the curtains, move the furniture around, plant flowers and find new ways to use old items. I also love to create with my own hands some of the ideas I have had in my head: to make a coat rack out of old forks, or to cover a stool with Chinese newspaper etc.

If the weather is nice, bicycling along by the seaside is very enjoyable, or I can ride my bicycle to a museum, fair or the cinema – all kinds of culture fill me with enthusiasm.
How I overcame the challenges of my illness

Competitive wrestling started in Finland in 1897. The original rules dictated that a wrestling match was conducted in 15-minute sessions or ‘bouts’, with a one-minute interval between each bout. As many bouts were fought, as it took to achieve a pin or submission. There was only one category, regardless of the differences in the sizes of the contestants. However, it did not take long for the rules to be changed so contestants were grouped according to their weight, and time limits were introduced. Does this mean that fit and healthy young men do not have the stamina to continue wrestling until their opponent is pinned down or submits?

I myself wrestle daily, according to the original rules. I have two international opponents in the ring with me simultaneously: Mr Rheumatism and Mr Sjögren’s. My opponents are very experienced wrestlers.

Of the two, Mr Rheumatism is the stronger and more unpredictable. He is particularly active first thing in the morning and generally does not like to surrender, always going for victory. Mr Sjögren’s, from Sweden, is an opponent of a slightly lighter weight class. For several weeks running, matches with my Swedish opponent can result in his surrender.

On most days, my opponents are forced to admit defeat. However, this would not be possible without attitude, humour and excellent equipment.

On normal workdays the wrestling match begins when the gong booms out, with my able-bodied travel companion already standing by in an achy elbow and fingers and, sometimes as I am aiming for a quick victory over my opponent, a sore shoulder too. A light rain mac is the best solution. On the other hand, holidays demand attitude. Instead of relaxed leisure activities, wrestling matches are part of the daily programme. It is a shame, but there is no such thing as a holiday from illness. It is, however, novel and refreshing to take on your opponent under a hot sun and on various different tatamis: beach, rainforest, metropolises. There might be a day when I find myself in a darkened hotel room, lying utterly beaten under a cooling ceiling fan, while my travel companion freshens up in the oldest spa in the city. Another day, I find that I have got no further than a pedestrian underpass, just when the city’s famous ‘Noon Cannon’ booms out, with my able-bodied travel companion already standing next to it. At least I managed to see the smoking cannon.

Whether on holiday or at home, the day always ends with the sound of the gong. Some evenings, having beaten my opponent, my whole body feels tender and achy. Sleep brings relief. Other evenings, I realise that I have managed to beat my opponents while suffering only minor injuries. The matches are never gentlemanly: I do not shake hands with my opponents, neither at the start, nor at the finish.

Editors notes on English terminology:

A gong or bell marks the start and finish of a bout of wrestling
Doping is taking drugs to enhance performance
‘Dig deep’ is an English expression meaning dig deep into your pockets to find more money. It can also mean to ‘look hard’ to find something
‘Caught up in my coat tails’, refers to the ends of the coat wrapping around the legs and making it difficult to walk
A tatami is a Japanese mat, used in martial arts as well as the home