

## Local woman chooses grace, faith in battle for life

By Amy Blum

To know Becky Rybak of rural Kimball is to feel a ray of sunshine. She glows with gratitude and shines with grace. Her smile warms your heart. Her faith in God lifts your spirit, and her down-to-earth nature endears her to you in the most indelible way.



The reality of an ALS diagnosis, however, is put in color by Rybak and her family.

“I can’t just lay in bed and die,” Rybak said. “My motto is ‘one day at a time’. It’s all too much otherwise. We can’t live in what might yet be. I start every day with a

prayer. I say, ‘Thank you God for another chance to make this day great.’”

Of course, she is not perfect. Her house isn’t spotless. She might be known to cuss when the situation warrants, and there are days when the realities of life weigh her down in tears, anger, and frustration.

You could view Rybak as a typical 38-year-old farm/ranch wife and mother doing her best with grace and God in rural America. Though you wouldn’t be wrong, you also wouldn’t be viewing Rybak in full light.

Recently, Rybak became one of 30,000 people in the US fighting to live with a diagnosis of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis ... better known as ALS or Lou Gehrig’s disease. ALS is “a progressive neurodegenerative disease that causes muscle weakness, paralysis, and—ultimately—respiratory failure” per [www.alifestoryfoundation.org](http://www.alifestoryfoundation.org).

The harshness of an ALS diagnosis is put in black and white by information from als.net:

- 90% of cases are sporadic, meaning there is no known cause or reason for the disease.
- ALS is considered a terminal, non-treatable disease in Western medicine.
- Two to five years is the length of time most people live after an ALS diagnosis.

### When She Knew

A lifelong gymnast, Rybak attempted a handstand in the family’s living room in the spring. She couldn’t do it. Because she is also trained as a registered nurse who worked at Sanford Chamberlain until 2010, Rybak immediately knew something was wrong.

“My first thought was muscular dystrophy or something of that nature,” she said. “I never imagined it was a neuro/nerve issue.”

Physical therapy was Rybak’s first action, but she saw no results. In July, she saw a neurologist who danced around ALS but sent her on to the Mayo Clinic. After extensive tests, Rybak and her husband Mike received confirmation of devastating news in September.

“Life is so precious, and this reminds us we are not in control,” Rybak said with a smile through tears. “We are all dying. I just happen to know what is trying to kill me.”

### Choosing to Fight

“I have an amazing support system in Mike,” Rybak said. “He has an amazing faith, and he is open to so many possibilities. We have two little boys. We have to try every option out

there, even if those options aren't considered mainstream."

After much research and prayer, Rybak was evaluated by and developed a treatment plan with Dr. Bill Bilica of TriLife Health in Fort Collins, Colorado. Rybak is currently on a strict diet and supplement regimen. For the month of December, she will undergo IV infusion therapy.

"The medical professional in me struggles to think Mayo could be wrong, and I know what we've chosen can be considered hokey by folks. But, this is all we've got. Our faith in God has brought us to this. My love for my sons, husband, and family won't let me just wither away."

Rybak and her three-year-old son Nathan will move in with her sister, who lives only 10 minutes from the doctor's office, during the infusion therapy.

"The hardest part of this treatment plan will absolutely be being away from Mike and Nicholas [the couple's seven-year-old who attends first grade in Kimball]," Rybak said. "We've got technology to help stay connected, but that's not the same as a hug and kiss."

### **A Day in Her Life**

Rybak quickly credits an outpouring of support from friends, family, and neighbors as great help. But, the reality of ALS' progression rips away at Rybak's independence.

"I have no upper body strength. Mike helps me shower and dress. I can no longer work zippers or buttons. I've started tripping and falling. I can't pick up my boys. Having to do everything so slowly in this fast-paced world is beyond frustrating," Rybak said.

She continued with tears and a smile, "But, we adapt. My sister is an occupational therapist, so she's found me some tools that make everyday life more manageable. I have more energy after my morning supplements, and there's nothing like snuggling with my boys to fill my heart and re-charge my soul."

### **Becky's Hope**

None of Rybak's treatments, supplements, or travel is covered by insurance. To help, several events have been planned for the Rybak family.

A social, steak dinner, and comedian will be held after Mass at the Catholic church in Kimball on Saturday, November 12. On Sunday, November 13, a [free will meal and auction](#) will begin at 5 in the Ag Building in Pukwana.

For those not able to make either event, donations can be made via [Becky's Hope Fund](#) or at First Dakota National Bank.

"I was not born or raised in these communities, but to have everyone's love and support is beyond humbling," Rybak said. "To hug and laugh with everyone who can make it to one of these events is a true gift!"

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