

# Healing



LaDonna Henslee,  
cardiac nurse at  
Mercy Oakwood  
Medical Building  
in Oshkosh

**When life overflowed with unexpected turns for a mother-of-four and breast cancer survivor, she chose to take that metaphoric cue to heart and began photographing waterfalls.**

**A**T THE AGE OF SIX, LADONNA HENSLEE already sensed something magical about the movement of water tumbling downward.

“There’s a small, cascade-type waterfall that goes from the rocks into the ocean,” she recalls of her first sighting at Reyes Beach in California.

“I just loved looking at it.”

And now, nearly 400 sightings later, her hobby of waterfall photography has morphed into a full-blown passion and heart-healthy hobby, which suits her well as a cardiologist nurse practitioner specializing in heart failure at Affinity’s Mercy Oakwood in Oshkosh.

In fact, she recently returned from a five-day trip that took her from Michigan’s Upper Peninsula to the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains in New York and included 62 miles of hiking and 79 waterfall sightings.

Listen to Henslee chat about this interest of hers and you’ll hear of “bucket-listers” and attempts to spot rarities, such as the elusive moonbow at Cumberland Falls in Kentucky. She reminisces about a frozen Multnomah Falls in Oregon. She points out that Niagara on the Canada side is spectacular. She names the upper and lower falls at Yellowstone as her all-time favorites.

She is also quick to mention lesser-known notables she has discovered along the way, like the unique set of falls within Watkins Glen State Park, and she’s been blown away by the sheer number that reside nearby and often get overlooked.

“Minnesota, upper Wisconsin and Michigan have a significant amount of waterfalls,” she notes.

From the outset, this became a group venture.

“I started out taking the family,” she says, mentioning her triplets and her son, who is 11 months older. “We went as a group because they shared the interest in the outdoors and they liked the waterfalls, too.”

It also turned out to be a useful means of helping her triplets, who have autism, adjust in a variety of ways.

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# Waters

to get them used to certain things,” she says, adding that the sightings became one way of helping her children grow accustomed to sounds and fluids. “It helps to increase their awareness and decrease their sensitivities, and it helped me share a moment that couldn’t possibly be created in any other way.”

In 2002, Henslee began keeping track of the falls she visited to see how many she could capture on camera.

“Photography helps me remember that moment in time when I was there,” she says. “You have to really sit there and understand the power of that monumental thing that’s in front of you.”

From then on, any planned getaways tended to include or revolve around waterfalls, but this past-time passion grew into something even greater as she leaned on nature’s beauty during her struggle to overcome breast cancer.

Worn down by the diagnosis, the surgeries and the inability to do the things she wanted to be able to do, she gathered up enough gusto to head out on a short trip to Munising, Michigan, as soon as she was able to handle the physical activity. There she sat at Miners Falls and looked out on a Lake Superior sunset.

“When you look at it and you think about not being able to see that in the future, you really do fight to be the person that you want to be and maintain the life that you want to live and survive a deadly diagnosis like breast cancer,” she says.

Now two years cancer-free and proud to be able to share her survivor story with others, Henslee continues to turn to waterfalls time and again as a form of exercise, adventure, relaxation and renewal.

“Everything on Earth is formed by water and its movement, so it’s

calming to me,” she says. “Whether it’s a large volume of water going over a cascade or a small tunnel of water going through a glen, it puts perspective on a very hectic life. Yet in that moment in time, it’s not so hectic.”

So what’s next on the docket?

Henslee has her sights set on a springtime trip to Havasu Falls and its vibrant blue-green waters set against a backdrop of red rock walls located on Havasupai-owned land within the Grand Canyon. In preparation, she has been running 10 miles a day to ensure she’s able to handle the rugged hike and take on her next big aqua adventure. @

Snap shots below taken by Henslee at Yosemite National Park.

