

Wesleyan Alumna Overcomes Adversity, Becomes Award-Winning Business Owner

By Laura Hanna

Drifting in and out of a coma, Teresa Nelson (Walley) would briefly awaken and hear, “This is a miracle child. She shouldn’t be here.” She knew her car colliding with a semi bob-tail truck was a serious accident. Little did she know at the time that had the impact been two inches to the right over, she would have been decapitated.

Nelson was knocked unconscious at impact; the impact on her head put an 18-inch crack in the windshield. “I lost most of my blood. I was in bad shape,” said Nelson, who spent a year in a hospital bed while learning how walk, talk, and eat again. Most of her memory was taken and coloring with crayons was needed to regain coordination.

Nelson then battled depression and experienced some panic attacks over the next few years. “You almost die – you’re entitled to have a few panic attacks,” she said.

But the good memories she has from that period are due to the support she received from Texas Wesleyan University. The most memorable to me . . . was that when the car accident happened in my senior year and almost killed me, not only were the all professors and the administration willing to work with me, but they took it a step further. The professors were calling my parents’ home and checking on me and cards – just shoeboxes full of cards – were coming in from students I didn’t even know at the school.

“It was kind of a legacy on the campus. It’s kind of a hard way to get your self known, let me tell you,” she joked. “It really impacted everybody because their mortality came in check and people thought, ‘Gosh, that could have happened to us.’ At 21 years old, it kind of shakes up a campus.”

She wasn’t able to graduate on her original timetable because of the recovery time. “It was really sad for me to see all of my friends graduating and I couldn’t because I had been thrown back at least one semester. I had lost most of my memory. So, it was really going to be a challenge to see if I could graduate. It was a very severe accident.”

She attended the ceremony in a wheelchair and they had made a spot for her up front. “It still gets me emotional because Jake Schrum [the University’s president at that time] used my story as the topic of the graduation speech. He talked about the determination and inspiration of one individual and how it impacted others. It was very moving; my whole family was in tears.

“Then as each of my colleagues walked across the stage, most of them who knew me well had done some sort of a personal gift – it might have been a poem or they wrote a letter or they made a craft or did made something for me. As they came off the stage, and hugged and shook hands with the professors, they came by to me and presented me with their gift,” she said. “It was just amazing.”

The outpouring of kindness and support, Nelson believes, are part of what makes Wesleyan special. “You might think, ‘Well, everybody would have done that.’ I don’t know that that’s the case. If you go to a school with 50,000 kids, maybe your three best friends would have done that. But these were even students I did not know well, who were in other areas of the school,” she said.

“Those are very fond memories for me. I still have all of those things. It’s really important for me that they know – and they know who they are – that they really impacted me in the long-term because of those small tokens of kindness.

“That’s why Wesleyan really can do no wrong,” said Nelson. “They were just there for my family and for me when I needed it.” She tackled the challenges of going back to school, including having her dad sit in some classes and take notes for her, and was able to graduate the next year.

While most people feel elation after commencement, Nelson didn’t quite react that way. “It was sad. It was depressing for me when I graduated. I hated it. I went into a funk for about three months. Nobody wanted to be around me after that! I *really* enjoyed school and stayed as long as I could,” she said.

After graduating in 1993, Nelson went in for a follow-up visit for her head injuries. “I was diagnosed with a brain tumor that they found by accident – because of the accident. I told them, ‘Bring on my 40s because the 20s just stunk!’ There will be no over-the-hill, let me tell you. I mean I don’t care; I’m just glad to be alive. The 20s were not a good decade for me. Wesleyan just has a very emotional impact for me; that people would just come to the aid and attention of one student to the extent that they did. It was amazing to me and I tell that quite often to people. It’s not something that you would find at a large university.

“That sense of commitment to the student, no matter what the circumstance – and hopefully, it’s not that extreme – but coming to the aid or being there for each other is what, in my opinion, Wesleyan has been known for, for a long, long time.”

In a way, the accident saved Nelson’s life. If the doctors had not been checking her head, the tumor might have gone undetected. But it was another uphill battle. Following a 14-hour surgery, she had to learn how to walk, talk, and eat yet again only one year after the previous recovery.

When she finally made it through the tough times, Nelson started socializing and tried dating for a while. “I was at home for months; I was lonely.” She faced rejection and, to some extent, came to expect it from men.

Her true love showed up on her computer screen – by way of an IM, although she didn’t understand what an instant message was at that time. She was just wondering why that box popped up without warning.

They “talked” via computer for a while and then he offered her his phone number. They agreed to meet, but he had to go through the proper channels – coming to meet her parents first. “And five months later, we were married.”

But during their first dates, it took a mental adjustment on her part to realize that Dennis wasn’t going to say anything terrible, like she’d heard from others. She even started pointing out what she perceived as physical flaws and he seemed bewildered. “He said, ‘Teresa, I don’t see what you’re saying.’ That saying about ‘love is blind’ is true,” said Nelson.

With a background in banking and economic forecasting, Nelson had no clear future or set job path after graduation and after enduring so many health difficulties. She was surprised when the owner of a tea room and craft mall store in Burleson, asked her to put together some bath-and-body gifts for sale. “I looked at her and said, ‘Why would I know anything about bath products?’ ”

Nelson had no idea that would become her future as Teresa’s Treasures gourmet baskets and gifts. “That was a God thing. That’s how I view it.”

Nelson never dabbled in crafts or had any interest in those types of hobbies. “My joke is that if you get hit in the head enough times, it’s amazing what will fall out. And that’s really what I believe because I had never done anything crafty in my life. Always about the business, always about the numbers, and always very straightforward.”

But she put some products together and all were sold in six weeks. Soon, she had hundreds of orders for Valentine’s Day. “It still didn’t click that this was what I was going to do,” said Nelson. “I just thought this was a good pastime; something I could do for a while.” So she filled all the orders and then sent some fliers to realtors to drum up a little business.

But during her first Christmas season, she received 1,800 orders. She had a 500 square-foot work space in her home and did not have any employees. “I had stuff set up on card tables. There was no business going on here; I was just trying to survive.”

A couple of weeks before Christmas, she was feeling overwhelmed from doing it all herself and trying to work out of the house. Her husband said, “Teresa, you’re in this now. What are you going to do?” Then she thought, “I think it’s kind of stupid to stop now if it’s going well, but I have to figure out what I’m going to do because this is not working.”

So they found space in the Everman office park, where the business is now, in February 2001. Nelson was happy to no longer have to put baskets together in the bathtub and the garage – anywhere she could find space. “I’m not the best example of how to start a business,” she joked, “but it sure worked.”

Her parents had some foreshadowing of Nelson's entrepreneurial future when they saw the activities she chose for playtime. Forget Barbie or holding tea parties. "When I was three years old, I played restaurant. I had menus and I had real money in my cash register," recalled Nelson. "I was an entrepreneur at heart from very early on, but I don't think I recognized that until I was given the opportunity, and then it blossomed."

And now that Nelson runs her own business, there's no going back to corporate life. "I would be a terrible employee," said Nelson, laughing, "because I've just been a boss too long and I've been independent and been able to impact my own destiny, if you will. I really can't imagine trading that in."

Striking it rich and becoming famous are not among Nelson's business plans. "My true motivation is staying out of corporate politics and staying out of an environment where you can't create your own surroundings," she said. "That's what I love here is that if we come up with a great idea and we implement it and it's successful, you get that immediate satisfaction of thinking, 'Man, something I developed turned into something great.' And that's really not something you can trade, in my opinion, now that I've experienced it."

After four years of going solo, Nelson added employees and developed a Web site (www.treasuresbyteresa.com). Now she has an 8,000 square-foot space with a showroom, storage area, and work facility. She has eight employees, all of whom are trained to treat customers with respect and go beyond the norm to make them happy and satisfied.

Nelson's husband, Dennis and Father, Howard, delivers the baskets. "I'm jealous sometimes because he gets to see the recipient's reactions," said Nelson, who sometimes goes on deliveries so she can see for herself how recipients like the product. "We don't sell cookies and candy. We sell emotion," she said.

Approximately 50 percent of the business comes during the Christmas season, which means the staff of Teresa's Treasures are designing and delivering 6,000-8,000 baskets. "We have some customers who only order at the holidays."

The FBI, CIA, the White House, Mayor Moncrief, heads of state, the governor's office, music performers, and Air Force One are among the high-profile clients of Teresa's Treasures. One her workers took a call from a Lieutenant Colonel, who happened to be the pilot of Air Force One. Another order came from a British ambassador. Half of her business comes from North Texas, while 25% is statewide and the other 25% is national and international.

With more than 1,800 products in stock, Nelson strives to offer more unique products than her competition does. She buys from more than 700 vendors, traveling nationwide to find the right products. She also likes to go to out-of-the-way vendors and more of the small- and medium-sized businesses. "We have exclusive rights to half of our inventory," she said to offer more unique products for our clients.

“One of the most unique ones we sell is the ‘Oops Basket’ ” – an apology basket complete with “So Sorry Snack Mix, Sorry Coffee, and Oops Popcorn.” The front is adorned with a chocolate screw and a “Sorry I screwed up” tag attached. Nelson said this option gives people the chance to apologize for whatever error was made and to try to make amends through the humorous basket. (See photos.)

Other themes include college care packages, thank you baskets, bridal amenities, sugar-free gifts, birthday baskets, Texas gifts, and kids’ products just to name a few. “We have never sacrificed quality, even in the smaller baskets,” said Nelson. “Gift baskets are so varied. These are design techniques. It’s not just things thrown in a basket and put a bow on it.”

Nelson’s bachelor of Business Administration degree obviously has a direct correlation to her daily work. But a course she did not want to take has helped immensely as Nelson has become a professional public speaker.

“I believe it was a freshman or sophomore class and I *dreaded* taking speech. It’s funny now because I didn’t even realize that later I would turn into a motivational speaker who does this now for part of my living,” she said. “It’s funny because I put it off until my senior year and we joke about it now because what I hated so bad turned out to be one of the most contributing classes that I’ve ever had, and not even in my major, because I use it so much – how to read your audience, how to present well, how to use humor all with the serious. I still have all of my textbooks and notes from that class because I learned so much.”

Theatre Professor Connie Whitt-Lambert has fond memories of teaching Nelson. “Teresa took one of my classes when I first came to Wesleyan and proved to be the kind of student that every teacher wants – interested in the material and driven to succeed in the course. What was ironic about this was the fact that this was a speech class and Teresa seemed to dread every speech. Even though the primary class activity wasn’t something she really wanted to do at the time, she still worked hard to become an accomplished speaker. I consider her one of Texas Wesleyan’s true success stories.”

Nelson certainly has had many successes. The survivor is feeling good, although she does have “cluster headaches” once or twice a month. Those are 10 times the strength of a migraine. And her business prowess has earned her many awards, including 2002-2004 Small Business of the Year, 2003 Mayor’s Award for Entrepreneurial Excellence, and the 2007 Great Women of Texas. Nelson has been inducted into the 2005-2006 Who’s Who for Business Executives and was honored as the 2000 American Business Woman of the Year. 2006 National Designer of the Year 2006 Mayor’s Global award for Importing

And what would the proud alumna put in a Wesleyan basket? “We would do a lot of blue and gold because we do it in the color scheme. We would add the chocolate rams. We would use a bright blue package of French vanilla popcorn, which would be incredible. We could do a Wesleyan-themed coffee because we have private label coffee and we could put the Texas Wesleyan flame on it, put the logo on there. We could do Texas

Wesleyan ribbon. And then we would definitely want to put in there, in the color scheme, we have some amazing honey mustard pretzels and a half-pound peanut butter cup. It's homemade peanut butter and it either has cookies and cream inside or it has fresh caramel that they make there at the vendor's or a soft creamy marshmallow center. That would be something that would have to go in. Those are some of our favorite items and they are our most requested."

Life is what you make it and a Wesleyan degree and determination surely contributed to the success of this alumni entrepreneur.