

Oak Park minister survives effects from lightning strike

During Sunday's storm, lightning hits tree, stuns woman

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The tree that took the lightning hit which affected Nolte.
Meg Power/Staff



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The early afternoon hours on Sunday, **May 6**, were like any other day for Rev. Kathy Nolte.

She was with members of her congregation, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, participating in the annual CROP Hunger Walk, when the weather began to display the typical spring pattern of shifting between sunshine and storms. Mother Nature made up her mind around 2 p.m. and the storms rumbled.

The crowd dispersed and Nolte, along with a mother and son, quickly started walking home. Nolte didn't have the key to her back door so she took the less direct route around the block, skipping her alley pathway.

That's when everything went black.

When Nolte slowly regained consciousness, she was in an ambulance, her body covered in electrodes.

"I was thinking something bad happened and I'm kind of at the center of it," Nolte, 57, recalled while resting from her Oak Park home Wednesday.

The medics weren't quite sure what happened to her until they got the hospital, where the marks across her body revealed she'd been jolted by a lightning strike that hit a tree. The tree still shows damage. Fortunately, Nolte's proof is fading.

"I had lightning tattoos. The lightning entered my legs and exited out of my left shoulder," she said, pointing to the faded lines left on her shin. "It goes away after a day, which is too bad because that would have been an awesome tattoo."

While her injuries were examined at the hospital, she still felt dizzy from the fall and tried to absorb just what happened. Still in shock, people filled in the pieces.

Her walking partner recalled seeing her body go rigid, and watched her eyes glaze over as she hit the ground. The fall caused a gash on the back of her head that required 14 staples to close. She was 3 feet ahead of her companions, which might be why she was the only one affected.

"They asked me what my name was, and what day it was. I didn't remember," Nolte said. "I slowly began pulling it back together. I think I was so much in shock. You sort of just take in the information blankly and process that."

What kept running through her mind trumped her other worries: "I'm alive."

The doctor explained that the effects of lightning drain the body in a way similar to running a marathon, because it moves all the muscles in the body at once. Hers certainly ached and her heart was racing.

"I learned that I have a strong heart," Nolte said. "I took that kind of a hit and am still going."

At the hospital, as she attempted to piece the details together, the pain grew more intense, unlike anything she'd felt before.

"Every cell in my body was screaming," she said. "It's like severe muscle aches, except everywhere. All of them, screaming at the same time."

By Tuesday, two days after the incident, the reality beyond the initial soreness set in.

"I finally realized how close I was to not being here," she said. "My prayers are filled with gratitude."

Nolte said the outpouring of support from family, friends and her congregation has been incredibly uplifting, and on top of everything, has put her life into clearer perspective.

"It's shown me how good life really is. Things that got me down, things that were a burden, they all seem so inconsequential."

When Nolte goes back to lead a sermon Sunday, she said she's going to remember to thank everyone for their help, including the 7-year-old boy who aided her during the incident. On a normal day, she gives out a piece of candy to kids. This time, however, she's got a bag of candy with his name on it.

"I think he's earned it," Nolte said.