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## 'I have no life'

BY DENISE BACHMAN

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MONONGAHELA - Michael and Chris Singel of Monessen are leading a life that they bargained for when they wed in July 1999.

They have been forced to suspend - perhaps permanently - their plans to start a family because the physical intimacy they once shared no longer exists.

"My wife was always jovial, but you can't expect her to be jovial when she's in pain because that's what she is," Michael said. "Our biggest goal is to make sure she gets the best treatment, some pain relief."

Chris, 38, has reflex sympathetic dystrophy (RSD), a neurological condition that causes chronic and debilitating pain.

"Sometimes, a breeze is so intense I can't stand it," she said, noting that Michael can't "get close" because of her skin sensitivity.

Chris was diagnosed with RSD in April 2003, three months after she fell over construction equipment and landed on her right arm and leg. The first symptoms were bruises, and burning sensations so severe she felt like she was constantly being stabbed with a prod or a fireplace poker.

"It looked like I was beat up. It still happens," she said, pointing to red bruises on the side of her face that resemble acne.

The pain spread from her leg to her fingers, shoulder, neck, hip, thigh and knee. She wears a brace on her right arm to eliminate finger spasms and a small brace on her neck to bend an otherwise erect forefinger, and she walks with a cane.

The pain has held her hostage to the point she only leaves the house for physical therapists' appointments and support group meetings.

"I have no life. I can't drive. I can't work," said Chris, who admits she briefly considered suicide. "I sit on the porch, but I can't be in one position very long."

Still, she tries to put on a happy face, visibly losing her composure only when she

about her husband, upon whom she relies even for the most mundane tasks.

"I can't do my own hair or makeup," she said.

Even though RSD may have robbed Chris of many things, one of them isn't her sense of humor.

When she realized she needed help in the bathroom, she told Michael, "OK, maybe I have to get a bidet."

Sometimes, it takes her a half-hour to "shimmy into" her bra. "These aren't any 30-second jobs," she said.

Chris, who undergoes physical therapy three times a week, is awaiting approval for a spinal cord stimulator, which would reduce the intensity of her pain by 50 percent.

"Unless you have this or know somebody, people don't understand. The pain is indescribable. It's like a firecracker," Chris said. "I have to hide the pain because it goes on. I have to be strong. At 38 years old, I still have a heck of a lot of life to live."

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