

STORIES OF HOPE

‘I WAS A STROKE WAITING TO HAPPEN’

Kathy Howard went to a St. Louis emergency room in 2008 expecting to be told she was another victim of the flu season – until she stepped off a gurney and crumpled to the floor. She had suddenly lost all muscle control on her left side. Her physician responded with two revelations: She had suffered a stroke and has type 2 diabetes.

“The shock and terror of those first few days, I can’t even put into words,” Howard says.

Howard, then 55, never felt any symptoms of diabetes, but she knows she was a prime candidate. Weight: 289 pounds. Diet: lots of fast food. Physical activity: “vegetating.” Family history: eight of nine siblings on her father’s side died from type 2 diabetes or related heart disease.

Eighteen months earlier, her blood glucose, blood pressure and cholesterol – three leading risk factors for stroke – had all been at the high end of the normal range. In the meantime, her blood glucose tripled.

“I was a stroke waiting to happen,” Howard says. A blocked vessel interrupted the flow of blood and oxygen to a part of Howard’s brain, damaging nerve cells that send signals to her body. She had no balance, no feeling on her left side, impaired vision and a curled-up left hand.

“I began my new life that day,” Howard says. She spent four weeks in the hospital, then several months of therapy at a rehabilitation institute to help nerve cells form new connections. Aided by a large circle of supporters, including her husband, Jim, and their adult children, Jim Jr. and Jayna, Howard relearned how to stand, walk, see to her left, and use her left hand.

She also changed her diet, started walking for exercise, lost 85 pounds and went from insulin injections to one pill a day for diabetes. In November 2010, Howard walked the 12 miles from the hospital to the rehab institute as a one-woman fundraiser for the organizations that gave her a second chance.

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“I have so much to be grateful for. The hospital saved my life, and the rehab institute gave me my life back,” Howard says. “When I couldn’t walk anymore, the ability to walk took on more meaning.”

She never returned to her high-stress job as an office manager, choosing instead to volunteer at two hospitals as a mentor for stroke survivors, facilitate a support group, and start the ABC Brigade, an organization committed to stroke prevention and support of stroke survivors and their families.

“I’m on a new path. Sometimes you have to reinvent yourself,” says Howard, who still has to look at her left hand to control it and has yet to regain the feeling on her left side.

Stroke causes sudden loss of functions. Which functions – memory, speech, muscle control and others – depends on the area of the brain affected by the stroke. The level of recovery depends largely on the patient’s determination.

“Never, ever give up,” Howard advises. “I never look at my stroke as a bad thing anymore because so many good things have happened.”

She also is determined to beat diabetes. She hopes to be off all diabetes medication by 2012.

“If you’re not eating right and exercising, you’re going to pay the price,” Howard says, using herself as an example. “You have to keep working toward good health. Don’t wait until something happens.” ▲



Kathy Howard, left, with her daughter Jayna Howard