

Surviving a Stroke: Ricki Stajer's Story

Her knowledge and experience as a nurse helped her in the most untimely and life-threatening situation.

Ricki Stajer is an RN with over 40 years of health care experience. At a young age, Ricki's maternal grandmother lived with her family. Up until her grandmother's passing, Ricki was responsible for taking care of her. Ricki said that she believes this experience taught her how to anticipate and be aware of patients' needs.

“She was ill for many years with heart disease, with frequent episodes of angina. It was never a chore for me, she was a loving, caring and always smiling dotting grandmother and I loved her very much. I remember as a child always playing school and I was always the teacher but becoming a nurse was always my dream,” said Ricki.

In October of 2018, Ricki was conducting an eight hour class for 70 nurse and social worker community case managers in Los Angeles. The office she was located at was over an hour away from where she lived. She had arrived at the office around 7 a.m, an hour before the class started. Somewhere around 9:30 a.m., while teaching, she began to feel strange, as if she was very fatigued. Her 10 o'clock break was soon approaching when suddenly her arm would not move. She tried to use her other arm, but couldn't control it either. This is when she realized she couldn't see her computer mouse. She felt the need to stop the class so that she could get help without worrying the group. She was still able to speak, so she dismissed the group after turning to one of the participants in the front row and asking if she could notify the supervisor, Patricia, for help. After seeing Patricia, Ricki quickly informed her that she was having a stroke and needed to be taken to the emergency room immediately.

The paramedics arrived in what seemed like minutes, and Ricki was taken to the nearest stroke center. She was in ICU for two days, telemetry for four days, and was then moved to an

inpatient rehabilitation center where she spent three weeks in intensive physical, occupational and speech therapy.

“The most amazing thing of the experience was as the stroke started and I was presenting material and answering questions, generally interacting with the class, I had this voice in the head saying, “I’m having a stroke! I have to get help!” I was having a left-sided stroke and it was my right brain calling the alarm!” Ricki stated.

Ricki says that being a nurse helped her prepare for handling a stroke. Because she was very aware of the signs of a stroke, she recognized what was happening - that a stroke was occurring. Research has shown her that for every minute of delay with a stroke, 2 million brain cells die.

“I understand and trust the healthcare system. I am not naive in that I believe all will work perfectly, but I do have confidence in the individual nurses, doctors and other members of the healthcare team,” Ricki said.

As an executive leader, the director of the Inpatient Rehab and Skilled Nursing units in the hospital reported to Ricki where she was able to learn a lot about stroke care, both acute and post stroke. She was also a member of the CA Hospital Post Acute Services Advisory Board and that experience taught her a lot about stroke recovery, in particular the difference in outcomes between rehab in a skilled nursing unit versus inpatient rehab unit.

“I was determined to establish strong relationships with my nurses and charge nurses so that I would be accepted as part of the healthcare team taking care of me. For many years, hospitals and healthcare systems have been focused on developing “patient-centered” health care, but I have always pushed that paradigm to “patient-directed” care as I had learned through

so many years of nursing that it is the patient who must choose and own the responsibility for his/her outcomes,” said Ricki.

The neurologist determined that Ricki’s stroke was caused by a blood clot due to having AFib, irregular heart beat - which is something she can’t get rid of. AFib is affected by stress and overdoing physically.

“It was hard to accept that being an overachiever and someone who wanted to be available for family and friends no matter what, probably attributed to the higher risk of stroke, as I didn’t pay attention to better controlling my AFib. Hindsight is 20/20, but it was an important lesson for me. Meditation, relaxing, and letting go of what I cannot control are keys for me to avoid further strokes and that’s what I intend to do.”

Ricki said that she was determined from the beginning of her recovery to go into an inpatient rehab facility where she knew she would receive the most comprehensive multidisciplinary team-based care and the highest number of therapy hours/day allowed by Medicare. As she met each new nurse, therapist, and doctor she shared her thoughts about the importance of patient engagement and collaboration with the team, and then explained to them that she needed their partnership to be able to become fully independent again and to qualify for entry into an inpatient rehab facility.

“It was wonderful,” Ricki recounted. “At first, she or he would be taken aback and then, within a few moments, they would totally engage with me. I knew exactly which facility would be the best for me and I was able to get accepted there.”

Shortly before her stroke, Ricki had written a paper on the topic of patient care which the California State University Hospital in Northridge, in collaboration with Care Excellence, that

turned into an Ebook. This had provided a lot of resource material to back up her discussions with the hospital staff.

“It was quite the experience and I was so happy and relieved to be a full partner in my recovery care.”

Ricki spent six weeks in outpatient therapy. She then transitioned into taking many classes at the YMCA doing Pilates, Yoga, water exercise, balance, strength training all with the focus of increasing strength in her right arm and leg. Ricki says that she visits the YMCA at least four days a week and takes three-mile walks three to five days a week. She has to practice typing and texting because the fourth and fifth fingers on her right hand aren't as strong as they used to be. Her immediate memory isn't as strong as it used to be either. Ricki said she'll leave her my purse hanging in a bathroom stall if she's not careful. The most noticeable difference in her life now is that she has learned to slow down, to not accept the roll of being everything for everyone, and to not worry so much about little things.

“Life is different. I now focus on myself first because I can't take care of others if I'm not strong. I now truly realize how fortunate I was to have so many wonderful friends and family members loving and supporting us. I used the strength and positive energy these folks sent to us to give me strength and perseverance to keep working and regain my ability to walk without a walker or cane, to teach my right arm to move and position naturally, to retrain my brain to think clearly and remember words,” Ricki explained.

Ricki has also learned to give herself credit and peace, and recognizes how lucky she was that her brain recognized what was happening and enabled her to ask for help.

“Now I ask for help easily and without embarrassment. I recognize how this stroke has changed my family, how traumatic it was for them, how shocking and scary it was for everyone

around me while I didn't realize how terrible an experience it was for them. I wasn't scared, I was in the middle, focused on recovering, and it's only now I understand how traumatized my husband, children, sister and other immediate family members were affected. I am so much more empathetic towards others and I hope that I won't lose that awareness of how fragile and vulnerable we are, whether we are patients or people sitting in the chair next to the bed. I realize that I love people much more deeply and openly, and I am fundamentally changed in my approach to daily life."

Ricki said she considers herself to be the luckiest person in the world because her brain helped save her life. She thanks her husband who she calls the most loving and supportive, her family, friends, and nurses who helped her throughout this life changing experience.

"Being a nurse for my entire adult life has given me purpose, focus and values. Because of my nursing knowledge I have helped people in all stages of life, literally from birth to death and I believe I was able to comfort them and aid their healing. Ultimately it also protected me during a most dangerous assault on my own health."

