

Marianne Fedunkiw - transcript

My name is Marianne Fedunkiw and I was 34 years old when I had my first stroke. My stroke journey began in June of 1999, having had a horrible headache one evening after I went to sleep. When I woke up the following morning, I got up and tried to pick up a t-shirt, and for some reason it took me three concentrated tries to pick up that t-shirt. My coordination was off. I actually had to bend over and tell myself 'Bend over,' 'open hand,' 'touch t-shirt,' 'close hand, rise up again,' 'put on t shirt'. I thought that was a bit strange. But then I turned the corner, bumped into my husband who looked at me with horror in his eyes and he said, "Oh my God, I think you've had a stroke." And he said, "Come," and he took me to the mirror and I had a unilateral droop, one side was drooping. So at this point, I was flabbergasted myself and when I tried to speak, my words were garbled, at which point he said, "Get dressed, I'm taking you to emergency."

I recovered from that particular stroke and all was quiet for 15 years, until I noticed that I was having chest pains, like an elephant was standing on my chest. I had an angiogram done at Toronto Western Hospital and they found that two of three coronary arteries were entirely blocked. So I had a coronary artery bypass graft, a quadruple one, and then I was recovering from that, when in 2016, I had three other strokes - and this time, they included hemorrhagic, or bleeding strokes.

After my first stroke, um, the one that I had at age 34, I desperately wanted to get back to normal life as soon as possible, to healthy, normal life. I thought it was a blip. There was no lasting deficit as they like to call it. That was both fascinating and frightening to me, just how different it is to live after a set of strokes, and just how much it takes out of you physically and mentally and emotionally. And, so I have shifted to writing plays and novels now, versus working full-time in communications or broadcasting or teaching in university, which I used to do.

And there's been a shift in how I view myself. I'm fortunately, I'm basically an optimistic person and a curious person. So, I process whatever difficulties I'm dealing with when I'm writing. But, it's also caused me, over considerable time, to accept this new version of me. So I look at myself with the glass, you know, more than half full.

I had to adjust to living with what I lost as well as what I still have. Having a stroke in my thirties basically took having children off the table for me because I was counseled, you know, were I to get pregnant, it would be a very high risk pregnancy. Um, and even now, my gosh, it's more than 20 years ago, I still think about, you know, what it would have been like to have had a family.

At some point, as life begins to turn back towards the new normal, I found my passion again. It was the genius of one of the occupational therapists, Jessica Gilbert, at the

Toronto Rehab Institute. She asked me in one of the sessions, "What would you like to do? Maybe try something new." And the two things I came up with were tap dancing and sculpting. Now, I have never tap danced. I like dancing well enough. So, one of the pieces of homework was to bring in some information about whatever I chose. So I found some schools where I could start to learn to tap. And the other thing was sculpting. I had taken art class in high school, and so I actually took a sculpting course. And the triple genius part of this is that, I knew I was never going to make my living as a sculptor. So that freed me from being perfect. And I can tell you, in that sculpting class, for those hours, when I was moulding that clay with my hands, I didn't think about just having had a stroke. I didn't think about what was missing. I just concentrated on the joy of the feeling of the clay, between my fingers and the joy of creating something out of nothing. So if you can find a renewed passion, a new passion, even love for an old passion, it went a long way towards me feeling alive again, fully alive and fully a human being again.

After my strokes, I shifted gears and I'm almost finished a play, which follows four younger people who have had a stroke. And it follows them through the journey of rehabilitation and some of the questions that they ask themselves and ask others about their futures. And it's my goal, ultimately, to turn it into a musical. And one of the characters is actually a young physician who has a stroke in her twenties, and the character's name is Aleksandra, which is Dr. Pikula's first name.

I wanted to doff my cap, both to Dr. Aleksandra as well as to the entire rehab team, because it strikes me that there are so many people that help on the journey to healing. It's not just the neurologists or the physiatrists, but the rehab professionals, the speech pathologists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, as well as the family members. So I have family members in this play too, because I want to honour the journey that a poor bewildered family member has when their loved one suddenly is in the hospital recovering, or in rehab, or otherwise recovering from a stroke.

So watch this space. I'm hoping... ultimately, I have big dreams, big dreams. I want people who have suffered strokes to look at this and say, "Oh my God, part of that character, that, that was me, or that *is* me." And this gives me hope that somebody could get through the most difficult period and come out the other side. I want to continue to do stuff, be creative, be productive. So if I can help anybody who's had a stroke in any way, I'm there.