

BELIEVE - Stroke Recovery Foundation: Stroke Recovery with Purpose

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When I had the opportunity to tell my story for the *North Carolina Medical Journal*, I suddenly realized that six years had passed since my stroke. A lot of hard work has gone into my recovery. A lot of patience, diligence, and faith is required. These factors are a normal part of my life today. I have my self-independence today. I can walk and talk! My right arm and hand are works in progress, but I am a far cry from being in a wheelchair with broken speech. I smile each day and thank God for giving me a second chance at life and being with my loved ones and friends. A new me and a new purpose!

My hemorrhagic stroke happened on September 10, 2017, and was totally unexpected. It happened in an instant. Thankfully, my wife recognized the signs, and the nearby hospital had a stroke center. I credit my wife and the expediency of the EMS team for saving my life. My wife was my rock as I spent a total of 36 days in the hospital; she never left me and was my constant advocate. The bleed was too deep near my brain stem to operate. I had no idea of the devastation a stroke could cause. Fortunately, the bleeding stopped, but 33 days went by trying to regulate my blood pressure with no success. Finally, a nephrologist was summoned and because of him, my blood pressure is consistently below average. I was unaware of nephrologists before this experience, and I find that many others are too. People need to be better educated about their medical care options in controlling blood pressure.

Shortly after my stroke, besides my arm and leg being noodles, my biggest scare was the inability to answer my speech therapist when she asked me the antonym for "go." When I could not answer, I shut down and was wheeled back to my room. All I could think was, "What is wrong with my brain?" Thankfully, my cognitive skills slowly came back about three months later. However, we quickly discovered the brutal reality of health insurance inadequacies.

Typical insurance covers about two months of rehabilitation—physical, occupational, and speech. We paid out of pocket for insurance for two years before being eligible for assistance. After seven months, I asked my wife what I was going to do with my life. I could not imagine not working. I was a "Type A" personality and was in a wheelchair with many deficits. My wife said, "Pray about it." I started asking God what I was going to do. About a month later, I had a dream to start a nonprofit to help stroke survivors. I was

in disbelief, but I had the dream two more times. I even had the idea for the name, BELIEVE. I negotiated with God, and said that if I could walk by January, then I would start that nonprofit. January came and with help from my therapists at Steps for Recovery I walked a quarter of a mile around the rehab facility with an ankle-foot orthosis and no cane. It was now my turn to keep my end of the bargain.

My new beginning started when we established BELIEVE - Stroke Recovery Foundation in September 2019, two years after my stroke. In September 2021 we had a successful launch party on a wonderful evening with 150 supportive guests. Our goal is to provide support to stroke and other brain injury survivors who have inadequate health insurance coverage so that they can benefit from rehabilitation therapy, equipment, and continued care to aid in an optimal recovery. We do not accept a salary and our board members are volunteers. Since inception, we have provided over 60 grants to stroke and traumatic brain injury survivors; 92% of all donated funds directly assist stroke and brain injury survivors (internal data).

Today, BELIEVE - Stroke Recovery Foundation continues to support survivors financially, but we are also encouraging the survivors to gain independence. For two years, we have hosted Step Out with Stroke Warriors, a family-friendly event at a beautiful park that includes lunch, games, music, and encouraging survivor stories. The event is sponsored by local wellness partners and essential services that collaborate and work together to encourage fellowship and independence. BELIEVE also runs a virtual support group for survivors, where we share stories and play games, and in September 2023 we held our first fundraiser. More people are becoming aware of stroke survivors' needs and supporting our mission.

God kept his promise and provided me with a purpose. I just smile as each stroke "warrior" progresses. BELIEVE! NCMJ

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