

A Stroke of Help

A Stroke Recovery Journey



ALISON AND PHILLIP BELL

A story of stroke recovery and complications survivors could experience.

A STROKE OF HELP: A Stroke Recovery Journey

by Phillip Bell and Alison Bell

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Alison and Phillip Bell

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Dedication

For the thousands of stroke survivors and their caregivers.

I pray my experience brings you encouragement and the strength to continue working hard and maintain a positive outlook as your recovery journey progresses!

In memory of Dr. Carl Schmidt, a heart surgeon and stroke survivor who was my HBOT diving partner for a few weeks. Dr. Carl provided me with the courage and inspiration to continue working to get stronger and better. I can only hope to possess a fraction of his courage, and keep his memory alive through my efforts to inspire other stroke survivors as he did for me.

Acknowledgements

First, I have to thank my Heavenly Father as He has brought me safely through the valley of the shadow of death, and blessed me with a great team of medical professionals. Next, I must thank my wife Alison as she has been by my side throughout this journey and has been the best caregiver I could ask for. In addition, our family Rachel, Chad, Jenny, Daniel and Laura Beth have provided me with an enormous amount of encouragement and the inspiration to not give up.

Finally, I do not know what we would have done without our neighbor, Mark Kramer, as he came to our rescue numerous times. Lastly, we have been overwhelmed by the concerns, visits and prayers of so many from our extended family, friends and church family that I would run out of space to start naming you all, but please know that Alison and I cannot say thank you enough for everything you have done and continue to do for us.

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The Day My Life Changed Forever

A few months after losing my job we were home beginning to prepare for the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. It was Wednesday, November 25, 2009, the day before Thanksgiving and Alison was busy preparing for our family to gather at our house for a traditional Thanksgiving meal. Just before 2:30 p.m. I went upstairs to my office and shut the door because I had a telephone interview appointment with a prospective employer with a company near Memphis. I had a habit, whether at home or at work, of pacing the floor while talking on the telephone, and that is what I was doing that day. From my perspective the interview was going well, but then it happened. I heard a sizzling sound inside my head that was similar to the sound of bacon frying in a skillet. My initial thought was, wow that was weird, and then I asked myself what just happened? For a short period of time I still felt fine and continued my conversation and pacing, but then I started to feel lightheaded and nauseous. I sat down in my desk chair in hopes the sick feeling would quickly pass but it did not, and if anything it got worse. I continued with my telephone conversation and remember that I was beginning to slur my words while talking. I realized there was a serious problem when I heard something fall and hit the top of my desk. When I looked to see what happened I discovered my left hand, arm and cordless phone on the desktop! I quickly wrapped up the telephone conversation and called out for Alison to come help. Unfortunately, she could not hear me, but I was conscious enough to pick up my iPhone to call her. She tells me when she saw me it was obvious I had suffered a stroke. Luckily, Daniel was already home from college for Thanksgiving and he was rock solid, helping Alison to remain calm and staying with me while she made telephone calls to Rachel, our parents and friends. Initially, Alison was planning to take me to the emergency room herself, thus she called our next door neighbor for help. He told her time was of the essence and she needed to call 911 instead. Because I was slumped over in the chair and there was concern I might slide out the three of them got me out of the chair and placed me in the floor. It was at this point when I started to lose consciousness, but I remember them talking about whether they should give me an aspirin or not. Thankfully before a decision was made the ambulance arrived. Once the EMT's got upstairs they took my blood pressure expecting it to be

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sky high but it was in the normal range. They made arrangements to get me downstairs and into the ambulance for the short trip to the Jackson Madison County General Hospital. I remember hearing the siren, and then was unconscious until much later. During my period of unconsciousness Alison tells me we arrived at the hospital where my blood pressure was checked again. It was still in the normal range and arrangements were made for a CT scan of my head. That scan revealed the problem as it clearly showed a ruptured artery with blood spewing out. We have the CD of the scan somewhere in our house, but I never watched. I only know this from hearing the doctors talking with Alison several weeks later. This meant emergency brain surgery was needed immediately! A neurosurgeon was called in, and he set the stage for our future as Alison says his personal introduction was, "my name is Dr. Akin and I'm here to try to help your husband. I don't know if I can or not, but if I'm successful he will require months and months of therapy in order to recover." Fortunately during the introductions Alison was asked about my medications and if I had eaten. When she told them I had eaten breakfast, and I was on no medications, but I had taken a baby aspirin that morning bringing things to a screeching halt, Instead of going to the operating room for surgery I was moved to the Intensive Care Unit in order to allow more time for the aspirin, a blood thinner, to get out of my system. An intubation tube was inserted into my trachea while in the emergency room to help with my breathing, but as time passed I started to worsen and crash. Because my condition was deteriorating quickly Dr. Akin decided he could not delay surgery any longer. At eleven p.m. I was taken to the operating room for surgery, and two hours later Dr. Akin emerged as the surgery was over and I lived through it! Dr. Akin was successful as he was able to repair the ruptured artery, stop the bleeding and remove most of the blood accumulated on my brain, saving my life! After the surgery I regained consciousness, but was in and out due to the trauma and pain medication. Although the surgery was successful the lack of blood and oxygen to my brain caused me to suffer a hemorrhagic stroke. The stroke severely impacted me physically and cognitively. In essence it was as if my brain was telling me my left side no longer existed as I lost all feeling on the left side and was unable to walk or talk. In addition my vision was impacted as I lost peripheral vision to the left and was unable to focus my eyes

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consistently especially when the focal point shifted locations. In exchange I received double vision.

The Recovery Journey Breakthrough

We are now one year removed from the date of the hemorrhage and hemorrhagic stroke, and although I was talking and walking with a cane, I still had no feeling on the left side, unable to move my left arm, without peripheral vision to the left, unable to consistently focus my eyes, lacked energy, and was mentally AWOL. Upon my arrival for Aqua therapy one morning I was met by my physical therapist who was extremely excited as she wanted to know if I had considered doing Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy, HBOT. We told her not only had I not considered it, but I had never heard of it. She recommended we look into it, and consider making a consultation appointment with Dr. Roy Schmidt, MD at the New Life Medical Group in Jackson as some stroke patients are experiencing benefits from doing HBOT. After therapy in the pool that day we went home, and Alison started her HBOT research. Her findings ranged from an instant cure to it is a farce and scam. However, in her reading she did discover a statement where someone said that one hundred years from now we will be asking; they, [the medical community], had the technology, why didn't they use it? That statement led us to make the appointment. During the appointment Dr. Schmidt was very detailed in his explanation of HBOT, how it works, and what might be accomplished. While I was at Stallworth I was told there is a twelve month window of opportunity to experience recovery following a stroke, and I was at that point in time. Therefore, I asked myself, is it wishful thinking that HBOT would help? Dr. Schmidt was very patient and honest as he made absolutely no promises, but said if I wanted to try it I should do a minimum of forty dives, HBOT terminology for a therapy session. He also told us HBOT is not FDA approved for stroke recovery and therefore considered "off label". This meant we were rolling the dice as it may or may not help. It also meant that the therapy is not covered by insurance or in my case Medicare. If it failed to work I wasted my time and threw my money away. Being accountants we are very conservative and cautious, and wanted time to make our decision. After a few days to think about it, I decided that although I would be Dr. Schmidt's first stroke patient, I was able to be his lab rat and hopefully bring encouragement to others. **Reflect on 2 Corinthians 1:4.**

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