

Rayah's Story - from Hospital to C2S

Raynah is George and Ursula's niece who comes down from Brisbane every year with her partner Adam to take part in the City to Surf.

However, 2018 would be different starting on Christmas Eve, 2017.

Ursula and George were shocked to hear that Raynah had a stroke and was in the Stroke ward. They were in Brisbane at the time and raced over to the hospital.

Raynah was unable to walk, eat, had slurred speech and couldn't feel her left side. As she was 37 years old and extremely fit, it was hard to see her like that.

The first thing she said when they saw her was that she intended to do the City2Surf regardless of the manner in which she might be forced to do it.

What happened on Christmas Eve that triggered it?

I had a sudden headache come on at the base of my neck at around 7:30 pm whilst talking to my Mama on the couch after work one evening 3 days before the actual stroke occurred.

It became increasingly worse the day before the actual stroke, and I had to take 2 x Panadol to deal with the pain.

At approx 4:30 am on Christmas eve morning, I awoke to the feeling of the bed spinning so forcibly that I had to grip onto my sheets for fear of falling off while a voice inside my head beckoned me to 'breath in and out and stay calm as you are about to have a seizure'. I have never had a seizure before so this was out of the ordinary. Minutes later, I desperately whacked Adam to wake him from his sleep (poor lad) pleading for him to help me as I was about to be sick.

He ran to get a bucket and I was violently ill, vomiting profusely and I became clammy instantly. It became progressively worse over the next few hours after which we decided to call the home doctor. Thinking they would take some time due to it being Christmas Eve, I didn't anticipate a quick arrival, however they came within the hour.

The home Doctor (a nice, youngish lady who appeared to be Indian), came with her male assistant, diagnosed me as having a case of bad vertigo, administered a needle in my arm to stop the vomiting and handed my partner a script advising him to fill it and ensure I took the prescribed tablet at least an hour before boarding our flight to America the next day to commence our Christmas holidays.

She advised that the tablet would ward off any chance of continued symptoms of vertigo whilst we were in transit. She also told him that if I was not showing signs of improvement within the next hour, to consider getting further help.

I'm not sure how long after she left I found myself curled in the foetal position at the end of the bed and begged Adam to help me shower as I felt awfully ill from throwing up all morning.

When he went to help me, the stroke must have started to fully come on as I was unable to stand and almost ripped the casing off our shower trying to get my grip. As I couldn't stand, I sat at the base of our shower and he handed the shampoo to me, but for the life of me, I could not coordinate how to wash my hair, and began to cry begging him to get me out as I was scared I was going to drown there.

He took me out immediately and helped me to dry and dress as I had no ability to complete this process unaided. At this time, I asked him to phone my Mum. By the time he had spoken to her and handed me the receiver, I had lost my speech and was no longer coherent. I recall my Mum asking me 'what's wrong darling?'

I answered thinking I was coherent unbeknownst to me that I was making absolutely no sense and my dear Mother, knowing me better than any other soul in the world, replied 'I don't know what's going on with you and I dread to think what's wrong, put me back on the phone to Adam and get an ambulance now'. I then handed the receiver to Adam and heard him converse with her about getting an ambulance and letting her know which hospital I would be at. Somewhere in this time frame (it is foggy to me),

Adam must have sensed the possibility of a stroke and he had asked me to raise my arms, poke out my tongue and smile - all of which showed signs of something being terribly wrong.

He called an ambulance and to this day, I maintain that even though by this point I was unable to open my eyes, I could hear him from the other room (as though he was on speaker though he wasn't) being triaged by the ambulance call centre lady asking if I was still conscious etc. as they requested an ambulance as a matter of urgency. I remember thinking that this seemed like an awful overreaction, especially on Christmas Eve, and being worried that they were going to get annoyed at us for wasting their time.

But within what seemed like minutes, I heard the siren from the top of our street and moments later, three young paramedics (2 ladies and a male) arrived at my bedside and began administering medical care. They were all so nice. Even though I couldn't speak properly or open my eyes, I remember how caring and nice they were to me.

They advised that they wouldn't be able to fit the stretcher through our front door and asked if I could walk to the front door and I remember mumbling something along the lines of, 'definitely not unassisted'.

So, with the help of one on each arm, they helped me shuffle (I was very lopsided like a rag doll, limp and unable to walk at this point) to the stretcher. My eyes were still firmly closed and I remember feeling the warmth of the sunlight hit my skin, sensing that we were now outside of our apartment and the voice inside my head willing me to 'stay calm and keep breathing - in and out, everything will be okay, just stay calm'. The ambulance sped to the hospital with the sirens on as they administered ai from inside the vehicle.

We arrived at the hospital quickly and I was ushered through to Emergency. Canulas were injected, a number of nuero observations were performed and they ran me through a CT scan after which, a young male doctor appeared at my side and said to

Adam and I that he had heard we were supposed to travel to America on Boxing day to which I nodded and mumbled ' yes our holiday'.

He said ' I'm sorry, but you won't be going to America, you are going to be with us for a while yet, we believe you have had a stroke. We are going to take you up to the stroke ward'. I do recall thinking ' so that is what happens when you get sick at Christmas time, the beds are all full so they throw you in the stroke ward' .. haha.

At this point, Adam became visibly upset (his father passed away from a stroke) and he was scared and unsure of what lay ahead for us. But he never left my side.

He was there every single day, through everything, he is my rock and an absolute blessing in my life. Same as my Mama, God bless her, an absolute pillar of strength and support.

Here confidence in believing I would be okay is what fuelled my determination to get my life back. I was lucky to have so much love and support around me and excellent care and attention from all of the nursing staff along the way.

Love and unwavering support is crucial to your recovery.

How was Raynah on Christmas day?

Completely out of it. Conscious but I couldn't open my eyes or read my phone. I recall the whole family being at my bedside and thinking 'oh my Lordy, I have not been able to get up and shower or wash my hair or brush my teeth, I feel so gross right now'.

How long were you in Hospital?

I spent 5 days in the main block of the hospital before I was moved to the rehabilitation centre to begin learning to walk, talk properly and eat again.

Raynah told me she had to learn to Eat and Speak all over again?

I had speech therapy sessions every day for a month and had to have a swallow test after being fed through a tube and instructed 'nil by mouth' for 3 weeks.

Part of my rehabilitation was making sure my throat muscles regained enough strength to ensure I could eat (I started with a soft diet which was fowl and was monitored before progressing onto to other foods) without choking ('aspirating' in medical terms).

For many weeks, I received nutrients through a tube and could only have thickened liquids after a few weeks before they deemed it safe enough to begin reintroducing food into my life. What a great day it was to be told I had graduated to solids and have that wretched tube removed from my nose (it felt awful when they took it out not to mention the God awful smell haha).

How long before you got out of hospital?

All up, I was in hospital for one month and continued rehab as an outpatient several sessions a week at the rehab hospital for nearly 4 months after being discharged.

How long were you in Rehab?

4 - 5 sessions a day in hospital - 2 x physio learning to walk again (it took several weeks

and was aided with a mobility device initially) and then re-learn skills like balancing on one foot (extremely challenging to begin with), stand with my eyes closed etc. I eventually learnt to walk without an aid and then learnt how to run and skip and hop (that was really hard, I kept veering off to the side).

I also had speech therapy sessions x 1 a day as well as observations at meal times - when I could eat again - with the Speech therapist.

They sit and watch you consume your food to make sure you are chewing and swallowing enough. I also undertook Occupational Health sessions x 1 day and they would work with me to rep-learn skills such as typing on a keyboard, coordination and problem solving, mathematics, spelling, cutting with a knife etc. To this day, I still have no sense of temperature and reduced pain receptors on the entire left hand side of my body.

How long before you went back to work?

I commenced work again in March 2018 - I started on graduated return to work plan, 2 x 4 hour sessions per week and then went straight to 3 full days, then to 4 and have been back full time 5 days per week for several months now. I was determined to get my career back on track as quickly as possible.

How long did training for City to Surf?

Actually we didn't specifically train for City to Surf, but we were completing a 10 week challenge at our gym which included a lot of cardio work. I also graduated as a qualified Pilates instructor in June and have since graduated in 2 other Pilates related disciplines.

Adam and I train at our gym a lot, enjoy walking our dog daily and I dance ballet and tap weekly as well as squeezing in Pilates and yoga classes wherever possible. We also just ran Bridge to Brisbane on Sunday and I am to undertake further training for Pilates instructing in November.

So, there you go, that is some of my story. I hope it is able to bring some inspiration to others. A friend who is also a fellow young stroke survivor told me, 'I won't pretend to know what you are going through as every stroke is different and every person has their own challenges and story to tell' - that was pretty profound and very true.

Each stroke and every story of survival is different.

Stroke has taught me - aside from seeing the best of humanity through the constant care and attention, love and support I have received along the way, and meeting others in hospital who each have their own story of survival and show true heroism with each passing challenge - that the old saying 'practice makes perfect' is so very true.

The human brain is incredible. New neuropathways can be developed, old ones redeveloped and shaped with repetitive function and movement - you can form your own habits and re-learn things with practice.

We can all create new pathways in our brains. Now that is something truly inspirational.

PS: Ursula told me the first thing she said when we saw her was that she intended to do the City2Surf regardless of the manner in which she might be forced to do it.

In August she came down to Sydney from Brisbane with Adam and she completed the City2Surf course. This was a milestone for her and she is now doing other fun runs in Brisbane and enjoying life.

PS PS: Raynah and Ursula picked up when I crashed in C2S, and took one arm each and escorted over the line and, then home to Turrumurra - my guardian angels!

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