

Heather Williams

27 years old

Heather Williams is a bubbly and vivacious young woman. She is a former marine. Her husband, John, is a police officer and her mother, Linda, is the owner of an antique store. On April 7, Heather left work at 1:45 p.m. and arrived home at 2:00 p.m. Since John's shift began at 3:00 p.m., she called to let him know she was almost home and that it was nearly time for him to leave for work. But this was not going to be a normal day.



Heather: I got home around 2:00 p.m. The first sign of my stroke was that I threw up on myself. My body went weak and my speech was slurry. John brought me a bottle of water and some Doritos™. But that did not fix the problem. To settle my stomach I went downstairs to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. To steady myself I held onto the stair rail. When I got into the kitchen, I spread peanut butter all over the counter and just ate the bread. I couldn't yell for John because I wasn't able to talk very well.

When John saw her, he recognized the gravity of the situation and called Linda to report his fears. It was clear to both of them that something was seriously wrong. John was accustomed to emergency situations so he called 911 to summon the paramedics.

John: When the paramedics arrived, you could see the paralysis of Heather's right side. She didn't have any strength in her

right arm. Her speech was also getting worse. The paramedics did their assessment quickly. They lifted both of her arms up and then released them; her right arm fell down. They said that she was showing signs of a stroke and recommended that she be Life-Flighted [helicopter transfer] immediately to Saint Luke's Hospital Stroke Center in Kansas City without stopping at the local hospital. They said that Saint Luke's was the best hospital for stroke and that if it had been one of their own family members they would recommend it.

Heather does not remember much of what happened next.

Heather: The last thing I remember was getting on the Life Flight. They loaded me up, and that is all I remember.

Once Heather arrived at Saint Luke's Hospital, the stroke team worked briskly and efficiently.

John: When we got to the emergency room, the stroke team determined that Heather had had a stroke. They gave us some options. They recommended the corkscrew-type method for removing the clot. They told us that she was critical and that they would need our permission to do this because it was considered an experimental procedure. She continued to get worse. Once we signed over the paperwork to do the surgery, they started ... and we waited.

Linda remembers her daughter's state in the emergency room before she was taken off to have the intervention performed.

Linda: She was lying in the bed unable to look at us. She could not verbalize very much. They told us we didn't have many options left. They had tried the drip (tPA) but it didn't

work. It did not even faze the clot. This (the corkscrew) was our final option. John looked at me and I looked at him, and we pretty much said in one voice, "Do it. Whatever it's going to take, do it."

Heather was an unusual stroke victim. She was young, athletic and had none of the usual stroke risk factors. In fact, everything about this episode was unusual. They found that she was missing one of the back-up arteries that can protect the brain when the main artery is blocked. Thus, her situation was even more serious than the average patient with this type of stroke.

After the procedure, the stroke team asked the family to gather. They seemed to be the bearers of bad tidings. A very large clot had been removed from the left internal carotid artery with the Merci® Retriever, but they were concerned because of the absence of the back-up artery.

Linda: The doctors had all the family members and friends come together. The chaplain was there, too. They pretty much told us that Heather wasn't going to make it.

We had forty-eight hours. I did not understand exactly what they were saying but she was missing a major artery in her brain, and when they removed the blood clot, there was such a rush of blood into the damaged area that her brain might explode. John and I were on a forty-eight-hour deathwatch.

Once Heather was returned to the ICU, John and Linda were told to watch the blood pressure monitor closely. If the blood pressure began to rise, it was a bad sign.

Linda: They let us go back to see her after the intervention procedure. We were expecting to see a vegetable lying there. Not so! She had a glow in her eye and she waved at us with her one good arm.

We stayed there all night watching her blood pressure monitor. It stayed low, low, low. The next morning she moved her right thumb! Later that afternoon the toes on her right foot started moving and twitching. We knew this was good.

Recovery after stroke reversal may become evident to the family members very early, but stroke team personnel are careful about declaring victory. The family was sure that Heather was improving quickly.

Heather: Twenty-four hours after the stroke, I stuck out my tongue and then I waved at one of the stroke team physicians [with her weak arm]. I wanted to prove to him that I was coming out of it.

Heather was improving, but no one could explain why she had not spoken a word for forty-eight hours after the onset of the stroke. Heather remembers the sequence leading to her first words after the stroke.

Heather: Forty-eight hours after the stroke, I had an angel by my side, who said to me, "You'll be able to talk today so I'm leaving you now."

My speech therapist was with me. She said, "Let's do your ones, twos and threes." So I mouthed, "One, two, and three." Just then my mom came in and burst out, "You can talk!" I said to her, "Go find my husband so I can tell him how much I love him."

When John came in the room, he was expecting to talk to the doctors. He saw a bunch of doctors and nurses gathered. They all knew I was talking. So when John came into the room, I said: "I love you so much, John." His knees just buckled and he started crying. That is when he knew I was okay.

Seven months after the stroke, Heather was continuing to recover.

Heather: My leg starts to drag when I am tired and I don't have complete strength in my right arm. My speech also gets lazy when I am tired. Sometimes I have trouble with large words but Mom or John helps me.

Heather has a message to others.

Heather: Some people see me as a stroke victim, but I'm a stroke survivor. I tell them to live life day-to-day because you might not be around tomorrow. Make sure you love everybody around you. And for those with heart problems or high cholesterol, see your physician and take care of those problems because stroke can get you at any time.

John has his own perspective on stroke recognition.

John: I assist on ambulance calls, but I did not know the stroke symptoms to look for prior to Heather's stroke. Luckily, with the fast response from the paramedics and the quick flight to Saint Luke's Stroke Center, Heather was saved. I recommend that people learn what to look for and know how to respond if the symptoms are there.

Linda adds her perspective to the process of quick recognition and treatment.

Linda: What I saw was the fast response of everybody from the moment the stroke occurred to getting to the hospital, to the doctors assessing her. I also feel the rehabilitation was a big, big part of it. John and I were both there from day one. We knew her so well; we knew exactly what to watch for. We knew how to communicate with her. We could follow her progress very closely.



COMMENTS

“Being at the right place at the right time” summarizes Heather’s story perfectly. John was about to go to work when his wife’s stroke occurred. He immediately understood the gravity of the situation even though he admits he knew little about stroke before Heather had hers. He called 911, and the paramedics determined that this was a stroke in progress. They recommended a direct helicopter transfer to Saint Luke’s Stroke Center and that sped up the diagnostic and therapeutic steps, which are extremely time sensitive. All of these factors added up to success for Heather. The entire process is summarized by the stroke team as: “Just Get Here!”

