



A YOUNG NEIGHBOR'S STROKE HELPED 35-YEAR-OLD DONNA GARLOUGH RECOGNIZE HER OWN

Million Hearts in Action

[Strategies for Achieving Million Hearts Goals]

Donna Garlough knew something was off the morning of Feb. 12, 2015, when she awoke to a splitting headache. Then she couldn't grip the strawberries she tried to slice for her children's breakfast. Finally, when she went to pick up her babbling 18-month-old son, she couldn't babble back – the words just wouldn't come out.

"These are stroke symptoms," she heard a voice in the back of her mind say. But Donna brushed off the hunch and headed off to the shower, where she soon lost feeling in her left hand. After wrapping herself in a towel, she tried to smile at herself in the mirror but only the right side of her mouth grinned back.

"This can't be happening," she thought to herself. "I'm only 35."

But all morning, Donna had thought of Jessica Diaz, a young neighbor and fitness instructor who had recently suffered a stroke. In the bathroom, Donna realized her symptoms mimicked Jessica's in nearly every single way. That's when she finally accepted what was happening to her body.

Donna now shares her story whenever she can. She has blogged about it, shared it through social media, and on American Heart Association's ["Stories From the Heart."](#)

"I know that Jessica helped at least one person with her story, which means I could potentially help someone as well with mine," she says.



[Fast Facts¹]

- About 795,000 people have a stroke every year, with about three in four being first-time strokes.
- Someone has a stroke every 40 seconds. Someone dies of one every four minutes.
- Stroke is a leading cause of serious long-term disability in the United States.
- More women than men have strokes each year, in part because women live longer.



¹ http://professional.heart.org/idc/groups/ahamah-public/@wcm/@sop/@smd/documents/downloadable/ucm_491265.pdf and chapter 14 of AHA Statistical Update: Heart Disease and Stroke Statistics—2017 Update: A Report From the American Heart Association (<http://circ.ahajournals.org/content/135/10/e146#sec-250>)

[What She Did]

- Donna took better care of herself. She became more cognizant of what she eats and she makes sure she gets enough physical activity. “I don’t have a crazy exercise regimen, but I’m very active,” she says. Because she doesn’t own a car, she usually walks everywhere she needs to go. She also finds herself constantly chasing after two young children, ages 4 and 6.
- She takes aspirin as part of her regular routine. She takes one 81 mg tablet daily as a blood thinner, just enough to reduce the risk of another stroke. “I keep the aspirin everywhere. I keep one on my desk, in the medicine cabinet, in my purse,” she says. “I try to take it at the same time every day, but if I forget, I always have it.”

[What She Learned]

- Donna needed to pay better attention to her body and trust her instincts. Since her stroke, she has become more aware of when she is becoming fatigued – and makes sure she gives herself breaks as needed.
- She allowed herself to get too wrapped up in work and taking care of others instead of herself. Donna now makes herself a bigger priority. “I learned it was okay to just stop doing, doing, doing everything for everybody, and just pay attention to myself.”
- People can have a stroke even if they don’t have the usual risk factors. Donna was young, in good shape, and didn’t have high blood pressure – but she did have a [patent foramen ovale](#), a small hole in the heart that affects about a quarter of all healthy adults. The condition doesn’t usually create problems, but rarely, a blood clot forms and travels to the heart, slips through the hole, and makes its way to the brain, blocking blood flow and causing a stroke.



“As a busy working mom, you put yourself last and you don’t pay attention to your own signs of fatigue. But mothers need to put themselves as a priority in their lives, just like kids.”

- Donna Garlough

[What She Accomplished]

- Donna recognized she was having a stroke in part because she had read what happened to Jessica Diaz, a neighborhood acquaintance who was a young and healthy woman just like herself.
- Now she tries to share her story, too, whenever possible, hoping her experience will help raise awareness and spread word that strokes can happen to anyone.
- “If you have the tiniest suspicion, go to the hospital,” Donna says. “If you don’t go, you can lose mobility, you can lose brain function, you can lose the ability to think clearly, to speak. There’s a lot at stake. There’s so much you could lose if you don’t act quickly.”

The American Heart Association

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