

tales from the heart

Valerie Greene

Valerie Greene was a young woman going places. At 31, she was a successful businesswoman, the owner of a thriving estate financial planning firm in Winter Park, Florida. With an athletic figure, perfect health, and a thousand-watt smile, the outgoing Valerie had everything to live for.

One night after work in 1996, however, a headache changed everything. “I didn’t think much of it and went to lie down,” Valerie recalls. Six months later, she became extremely dizzy and disoriented. She went to the doctor, but nothing definitive was diagnosed.

Perhaps it was vertigo, she was told. Ten days after that, Valerie’s speech became slurred and one side of her body became numb, and she again went to the hospital.

“I was told to go home to ‘sleep it off!’” says an indignant Valerie. “They thought I was drunk, because I was too young to have a stroke. Then they said I might have multiple sclerosis. I refused to leave, and 36 hours later I stroked in the hospital.”

Misdiagnosing stroke is not uncommon, especially in women and younger people. In Valerie’s case, a blood vessel to her brain was blocked by a large blood clot, allowing no oxygen to reach that part of the brain. “I woke up in ICU, paralyzed on my entire left side, with hearing loss in my right ear and unable to speak,” she says. “I was kicking and screaming on the inside but unable to move or articulate my feelings on the outside. It was a horrifying and frightening living hell.”

Valerie was told she might never walk again; she was hospitalized for four weeks while undergoing close monitoring and extensive rehabilitation. Completely helpless, she had to learn how to crawl again; she admits that she



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became depressed and even thought about suicide. She was released into the care of a full-time home health nurse—but only after she demonstrated she could say a single word: “Help.” She left the hospital in a wheelchair.


Today, nearly eight years after her strokes, Valerie is a public speaker on behalf of stroke awareness. She has written a book, “The Fire Within: A True Story of Triumph Over Tragedy” (Alex Press 2004). She’s a half-marathon athlete, walking 13.1 miles, and was the nation’s top fund-raiser for the American Stroke Association’s Train To End Stroke program in 2003. She also lobbied on behalf of the Florida Stroke Act, which ensures that any suspected stroke victim is transported to a qualified hospital with special triage training and protocols to recognize stroke.

Valerie can no longer perform the complex financial calculations she used to do with ease. She still deals with some speech and physical deficits. However, she has no regrets about the unexpected directions stroke has propelled her life. “I have become a motivational speaker and a writer as a result of stroke,” she says. “If I can show how well I have overcome two strokes, perhaps I can encourage other stroke survivors to stay in therapy—recovery comes in the form of small, incremental improvements. Please, don’t give up!”

Valerie believes the strokes also helped her find her way in life’s spiritual journey. “I had to dig deep and find my fire within and ignite it,” she says. “Something pulled me out of the depths of hell, and I survived to tell the story.”

May is American Stroke Month.

**American Stroke
Association**

A Division of American
Heart Association 

With stroke, Time Lost = Brain Lost.

Learn to recognize stroke

and act quickly.