



## Life is a Journey

by Sharon Leitheiser



It was August 11, 1996 at the age of 49, when my life came to a screeching halt. On that day my husband Hal and I had gone to the Edmonds Fair and spent the day sampling lots of rich foods. Afterwards, we had decided to stop at the docks before going home.

I will never forget the complete relaxation that I felt that evening. The air

was warm. The sunset was filled with colors. The Olympic Mountains were tall and dark and so far away. I didn't want to leave. I just wanted to stay there. I felt so at peace. But Hal had to go to work the next day and I was getting ready to take a class (I was an elementary teacher) before the school year started. We left for home.

We had just walked in when the phone rang. When I answered the phone a state park ranger told me that I had to come and pick up my nineteen year old son.

Hal and I went and picked him up and dropped him off at a friend's house. He didn't want to go home and we didn't feel like arguing with him. Lately, it had been just one thing after another with him. On the way home I was so angry and irritated with him that I didn't feel the pain coming before my lights went out.

When I awoke, I discovered I was in a hospital. I remembered nothing after the vessel in my brain ruptured in the car and little of my hospital stay beyond visual impressions of color and shape and touch sensations, like warm water dribbling down my body when I took my first shower or the softness of a hand touching mine.

I thought in feelings and emotions rather than words. I felt kindness, gentleness, and love. From my hospital bed I saw a picture of my teacher

*(Continued on page 3)*

## Inside this Issue:

## Page

**Strokes can have very different ways that they affect us. Recovery can be quick—or slower.**

**Here are examples of the differences in outcomes with these TWO SPECIAL STORIES.**

*-ed.*

- Life is a Journey by Sharon 1
- My Life by Don 1
- Talking with Student...with Dennis 5
- June Aphasia Awareness Month
- We Wrote A Letter by Our Group 6
- Publisher's Corner by Nancy Alarcon 6
- Contacting the Clinic 6
- The Newsletter Staff 6

### **Next newsletter:**

- More letters from Stroke Survivors
- More CAREGIVING as a theme in future issues

## My Life

by Don Risan



*This summer, the Clinic has several special therapy classes. One of the therapies was for the people to tell their stories. This is from Don, who wrote up his story on 3x5 cards—and told **this** to his class!*

*-ed.*

In March 29, 1994, my stroke hit me in the building restroom in Bellevue. I crawled to the restroom and to, my surprise, could not speak either. My friends for "40-Plus" helped me to sit up. Technicians arrived in the Emergency Truck to help me.

*(Continued on page 2)*

*("My Life" - Continued from page 1)*

Here is summary what happened next:

- Overlake Hospital for eleven days
- Linda Myers was here (loving partner - 19 years)
- Ambulance to Northwest Hospital for three months
- Met Joan Jeager in Speech (special friend), PT and OT
- We got home and the Speech & PT followed me for six months
- Introduced Peggy Armiston with Kimerley Quality Care took care of me for 14 months at my home
- St. Vincent in West Seattle of recreation therapy for 9 months
- Linda, my two daughters, brother and wife and friends who all supported me through the recovering

In 1997, U of W Speech and Hearing and Nancy Alarcon participated in Group session and Coffee Club for six-half years. Before that in 1997, Sue Hunt (stroke survivor) and I investigated about volunteering with Virginia Mason Hospital. I decided to join in. I'm volunteer Out Reach for America Heart Association. I'm still going and I'm really enjoyed new patients with a stroke.

In sports, I enjoyed skiing, sailing and golfing. For skiing, we went to Snoqualmie Pass for the Ski For All organization. My short skis and "one hand" pole help me ski. For golfing, I worked on left stance my feet and "one-hand".

### **My Story Since 2003**

We were ready for the Holidays. We fixed our home for the Thanksgiving and Christmas in 2003. For Christmas, we were decoration for inside and outside of our house. I put the Christmas tree and lights. We were ready to celebrate the holiday.

I didn't realized but every year with Linda for Christmas is great event! We looked forward for Mexico trip. We were excited, and especially on the cruise. In March 2004, we flew in Los Angles and we were staying in a hotel for one-night. Morning, we arrived and large ship called Carnival Pride. The Carnival's person looked at the passport for the both of us. After that, they sailed to Puerto Vallarta. We inspected our room and seem luxurious but small.

Next evening, we arrived at beautiful Puerto Vallarta. Carnival Pride ship was on the dock.

Next day, we ventured in downtown. We toured on Mexican bus. Around 3:00pm, we decided to return on the ship. We rode on "beat-up" Mexican bus and then, I had a seizure! I was throwing-up in the sidewalk. Linda was really scared and hailed a cab. I was throwing-up again in the cab. It was a mess!

On the ship, the Doctor examined me. After that, the Doctor recommended to Linda and he transported me to land-base American Hospital. Immediately, the Mexican Doctor ordered several test. Meanwhile, I was a little better in the hospital room.

At 7:00pm in the evening, Linda paid on a credit card. The nurse said than we only have cash to pay the bill. Linda was starting to cry and Doctor said than the credit card was fine. The ambulance transported Linda and me on the ship. After that, Linda and I slept in our cabin room. Next day, I was fatigued for two or three days on the ship.

We saw Mazatlan from the dock. Linda had a tour but I stayed on the boat because I was too tired. Later, we sailed to Cabo San Luca. Next day, the Captain anchored and we had great view on the balcony. We decided to see Cabo San Luca. The small boat (taxi) carried us on the dock for 3-4 hours. The evening that day, we finally sailed to Los Angle. Next day, we got home. I was commenting about a terrible seizure but, over all, had great trip. Linda had a opposite view on that.

Around May this year, I had a seizure at home late at night. Linda called 911. I was throwing-up in the bathroom again. For twenty minutes, Emergency truck came and men transport me to Northwest Hospital. The Doctor prescribed Keppra pills for my seizure. After few days, Keppra pills worked fine and for one month, Keppra "saved the day"!

My recovery was amazing, but slow. I quit skiing, golfing and sailing in May 2004 and I already quit U of W Speech and Hearing in January 2004. I kept the Virginia Mason Volunteer job. In vacation time, we went to Hawaii for a week. Around the house, I stayed home and occasionally, I went the store for groceries and to the Mall.

Linda was worried and I was little weak.

### **Recovery Was Over!**

In Spring 2005, my recover was almost over. First, I bought twelve tickets for the Mariners baseball with Mike Gordon (stroke survivor). In the

baseball game, Mike suggested at me that Talking Books library looking for volunteers to work. I was definitely interested. In the Summer time, I volunteered. I had two jobs. Later, I temporary halted for Talking Books in the Fall.

Linda was still fearful but, I said that recovering was over.

In June 2006, I heard in Adults Young Stroke Support about Seabo-Flex (*therapy -ed.*). My right hand is weak because the stroke happened. The Seabo-Flex person improved that in the meeting. One week later, Northwest Rehabilitation and Occupation Therapy with Anne Mayton talked with me for right hand. First, Anne said that the insurance was able to pay the bill? I said, "Yes". Two or three weeks later, Anne and I started. In January 2007, they said that "No progress". I was disappointed.

In August 2006, Lisa Johnson with Physical Therapy and Julie Trautmann with Speech Pathologist joined in. They had lot of training for me. I had Anne for seven months, Lisa for four months and Julie ten months. Three people work on me for two or three days per week.

I was very happy at the speech program. Julie told speaking, writing and scrip to help in me in class. First, writing helps me at class and home for daily life and movies review. Second, scrip was able to talking with a 3"x5" cards. Also, Katy and Steve (Linda son and his wife) gave me an H/P computer in May 2006. Then, I was able to write and write scrip on the computer! In May 2007, I ended with Julie because U of W Speech was starting.

In April, Nancy Alarcon with U of W Speech was giving a speech entitled "Living with Aphasia" at the meeting of Adults Young Stroke Support. I was interested. Later on, Linda and I tested in the U of W Speech building. We passed! Intensive Program schedule was starting in June and July for four weeks. They had Group and Individual (with Brooke, graduate student) sessions. I was concentrated on practice speaking and "Wh---" questions. In July, Linda and I really like the program!

Finally, I thank you for Linda with helping me through my stroke! Steve and Katy supported me too. Nancy (and Brooke), Joan and Julie help me with speech. Erika, Spencer, Parker, Jack and Holly supported me. I have two daughters, son-in-law and kids. **I thank you all!** <<

*("Life is a Journey"—Continued from page 1)*  
friends on the wall. I was confused, I thought: "Why is that picture up there? I know who they are."

My connections to the real world moved slowly.

Later I was told that I had had a hemorrhagic stroke and had had brain surgery two days after "my lights went out" in the car. I was also told that when we got home I had started to throw up and told Hal that I had a horrible headache. Hal had assumed that I was sick from eating too much rich foods at the food festival. Vomiting and severe headaches are two warnings of stroke, but since I had had a hemorrhagic stroke, which is often fatal, the clot-busting drug would not have worked with me even if I had gotten to the hospital within the 3 hours of the onset of my symptoms. The cause of my stroke was unknown. I could have been born with a weakened blood vessel that ruptured as I aged.

But I still feel blessed. I didn't die. I lived.

On August 23, 1996, ten days after my brain surgery, I was discharged from the Valley Medical Center in Renton, WA. Before Hal took me to the Good Samaritan Hospital in Puyallup for inpatient rehabilitation, we were given pamphlets about aphasia (I had it), a serious speech and language impairment caused by stroke, head injury, or neurological disease. The nurse told us: "Most people have not heard about aphasia, nor do they know the term until someone in their family or a friend is stricken with it." She continued: "This pamphlet will tell you a little about aphasia and how it affects families and friends."

I remember glancing through the pages and stopping at a picture of a family on a picnic. I assumed that the picture was showing us that life goes on even if you have aphasia, but I was confused, I thought: "This is it. I'm going to spend the rest of my life going on picnics." It was at this moment that I felt a twinge of pain that cut deep into my heart. I knew then that my life would never be the same.

My recovery at the Good Samaritan Hospital was short because I was homesick and was not the perfect patient refusing to work hard in my rehabilitation recovery. I WANTED TO GO HOME!

After five days at the Good Samaritan Hospital, I began a cognitive functioning assessment. I was

*(Continued on page 4)*

*("Life is a Journey" - Continued from page 3)*

told that I could go home, but I had to agree that I would come back to the rehab center to complete the assessment.

The Home Base Services from Good Sam provided in-home rehabilitative care services for me, which included occupational and speech therapy. I had home care service for three months before I was switched to St. Francis for continuous speech therapy. Thanks to my teaching job, I had good health insurance.

On August 27 I went home with my older daughter Brenda as my caregiver

After I was released from Good Sam, and when I saw him coming through the door, the man standing there in wrinkled clothes looked so old. His hair was ruffled and his gray whiskers covered his worn-out rugged face. I looked at him and my heart went out to him like it always did.

He looked at me and said, "Sharon, I want to be able to help you."

Hal became my caregiver as I healed. Later in my recovery, I thanked God for my stroke. I felt blessed.

There is no cure for aphasia, and every person who is stricken with aphasia has different problems learning to live with it. After the stroke, I had problems in reading, listening, writing, spelling, speaking, and social skills.

I was diagnosed as having anomia (*inability to name objects -ed.*) aphasia, which meant that I had problems with word finding.

For example, if I was shown a spoon, I would recognize it at once, visually, but would not be able to say the word "spoon," saying instead, "That is something you eat with."

I also have a "tip-of-the-tongue" problem being able to say the first letter of many words but am not able to get the rest of the words out. Over time that has improved. I can get most words out without too much problem.

Over the years after my stroke, I have taken correspondence classes to improve my writing and my spelling, joined a Toastmasters Club to improve my speaking and listening skills, and am not upset anymore when someone reminds me not to interrupt when someone else is speaking.

Now almost 11 years after my stroke, most people who meet me do not realize that I have any language problems until I say something like this when Hal and I were on vacation in England at Stonehenge and I excitedly said to him while looking at some sheep that were grazing near us:

"Oh, Hal, look at the fish!" (*Note the problem with finding the word for naming the sheep. -ed.*)

And I don't talk politics!

I can laugh now when I make these goof-ups, but there was a time when I didn't laugh. After losing my teaching career and living with aphasia, I felt like a "dummy" and felt no reason to start my life over again. My body felt tired and old.

I had many days of weeping and crying filling my pillow with tears, but with one step at a time, I began to realize how blessed I was and I DID NOT GIVE UP!

In the back of my mind, I knew that God was by my side and the He would NOT GIVE UP ON ME and has never given me more than what I could handle. I now had a sober husband who worked and loved me, and adult children, who weren't perfect, but loved us and gave us grandchildren, and I had friends who have helped me walk through some tough times.

I now try to be a role-model rather than being a complainer.

After my stroke, I have raised money for the American Stroke Association by walking a half-marathon under the hot sun in Jamaica and a full marathon in cooler weather in Vancouver, Canada.

I have had a children's story published for the American Reader and have completed my book LIFE AFTER STROKE- - - BETTER AND STRONGER.

It has not been easy marketing my book in the competitive world of publishing but I'm not giving up.

I have discovered that most of my joys have been found in my challenges.

Life is a journey. I believe in showing not telling and have learned to embrace each day as it comes with a smile and a grateful heart.

I am a survivor and **so are you.**

**Look out world.**

**Here we come.**

<<

## Talking with students.

*This is part of our July special meeting with Dr. Carpenter's class Introduction to Communication Disorders. -ed.*

**Dennis:** First of all, my name is Dennis and I'm a stroke survivor 23 and a half years. I was a teacher in Kent and I was teaching PE and I was a little bit headache and I said - I'm going to go take a nap. Which that's NO for teachers, you can't nap. Well and I did, another teacher said, Dennis you need a little assistance so he called a medic and a medic came over and they says you gotta go to the hospital, and that was a stroke. It's called an embolism. It ruptured in my brain.

**Nancy Alarcon:** So Dennis – an aneurysm?

D: Yeah, that's different than, uh, yeah.

I was there about 3 weeks in Valley General Hospital. They transferred me to Good Sam's Hospital. It's a big, big hospital that has all the things that people in the hospital for the strokes or head injury and its rehabilitation center. And I was there for about a month and then I had a reaction

*like* it was all my whole body was burned. So they transferred me off to Harborview and they thought I was going to die, but luckily about 6 days I was getting better and I was released I was all healed up. They transferred me to Good Sam's for another 5-6

months. And at this place where I can learn how to eat and walk, not walk, wheelchair, you gotta learn how to work your wheelchair first and stuff like that, I was there like 6 months. I went back to the home. A great woman, my wife was she helped me so good for another year and that's when I went to a couple other places the (rehabilitation?) center so I can get a job and this school, they



*Dennis Duva*



*UW Student*

had a trial it was where you go 1 year of not a teaching job because I can't write and I can't read but I can talk a little better. Anyway that was at 1 year and they said sit down and you're gonna retire. And I was crushed but I understand why, I can't write, I can't read and number one is at least you can read and write. Anyway I volunteer about almost 15-20 years of Soos Creek Elementary school, I used to volunteer there and...

N: What kind of volunteer work did you do Dennis.

D: in the library, I wasn't a teacher – oh what do you call it?

N: What's happening right now? What's happening right now, Dennis, as you're trying to think of it?

D: I'm getting a little spasticity.

N: A little spasticity? In your voice. But when you said "I wasn't a teacher, I'm a..."

D: That's right, I can't, I'm not sure what they say, what it's called, I'm not sure.

N: I'm going to stop and just have everyone think about, did you just hear the change in Dennis' voice quality? So in terms of dysarthria, we hear the spasticity, the tightening of the larynx... when it gets a little more difficult, you can feel the tightening at the level of the larynx that's something he can't easily control.

Dr. Carpenter: Dennis how old were you when you had your stroke?

D: 34 years old (counting on hands)

N: I've always said to the class that there's an irony in Dennis having his stroke while he was at work. It was a blessing in the midst of having a curse of having had a stroke but a blessing because he was on the job so his coverage through what is referred to in the state as Labor and Industry claim because he was on the job has been phenomenal in recovering.

Student: How do people get services that they need?

N: His insurance still pays for him 23 years later for him to come to our group once a week. <<

For the **June National Aphasia Awareness Month** our group wrote and sent a letter of thanks for the Senators who sponsored a resolution supporting those with aphasia.

We continue to share our thoughts as we delight in our recovery—in our newsletters and in this special letter to Congressmen.

Dear Senators Joseph Biden Jr. and Tim Johnson:

Thank you very much for taking the time and energy to pursue the resolution declaring June 2007 as Aphasia Awareness Month. As we who have aphasia, we are pleased to see the United States Congress recognize the difficulties we experience with communication on a daily basis.

This resolution means a great deal to the many people who are affected by aphasia, not only those diagnosed with this impairment, but also their loved ones. We hope that this new attention will help clarify that aphasia does not affect intelligence; rather, it reflects an impaired ability in accessing the words to express and understand ideas.

We represent a group of people with aphasia who meet weekly at the University of Washington Speech and Hearing Clinic to discuss topics, socialize and practice strategies we have learned in speech-language therapy. Enclosed is a copy of the latest edition of "In Search Of..." which is a newsletter written by members of our clinic group intended for people with aphasia and their support systems. We are grateful for your efforts in helping bring aphasia to the forefront of people's minds.

Yours Sincerely,  
The UW Stroke Conversation Group <<

**Newsletter Staff:**

**Publisher & Chief Editor:**  
Nancy Alarcon, M.S., CCC-SLP  
Clinic Director

**Writer's Guild Editors (with aphasia):**  
Bob Anderson  
Ted Paluchowski

**Publisher's Corner:**

by **Nancy Alarcon**, Clinic Director



What a remarkable issue, contrasting two unique and quite remarkable stroke survivor stories. Each is a testament to the tenacity of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

For Sharon and Don, writing about their personal experiences allows them to reflect on their challenges

and their progress; and acknowledge the importance of support in their lives.

For us, we are able to share in their journey, reflect on where we are in our lives, and appreciate all that we have.

I would be remiss as a speech-language pathologist if I didn't also note that these stories allow us to witness the impact of aphasia on written language. In spite of disrupted language, Don effectively provides a timeline of important events in his ongoing recovery.

As we wrap-up another academic year, I want to extend a sincere thank you to Bob and Ted for their relentless efforts to ensure that this newsletter gets out each quarter! And special thanks to Dr. Carpenter for providing us a platform to present information on aphasia and stroke recovery to UW students. We'll keep searching for more stories—see you in the Fall!

**University of Washington  
Speech and Hearing Clinic**

4131—15th Ave, NE  
Seattle, WA 98105  
Phone: (206) 543-5440  
Fax: (206) 616-1185

<http://depts.washington.edu/sphsc/clinic>

Visit our web site to:  
- learn more about our services; and,  
- to access past issues of the Writer's Guild quarterly newsletter:

***"In Search Of. . ."***