



With a little help from my FRIENDS



I had a wonderful time with these stroke survivors at their support meeting. They've had it tough. But they've got grit and determination. It's called guts, and they've made a pretty splendid job of making life work after life-changing strokes.

By Terry Owen

You could hear the laughter in Sandton. And we were in Sandringham.

Quite a distance.

Indeed, but that's what happens when deep-in-the-gut laughter rises and takes flight. Like all the sopranos in the world have become angels and are flying overhead.

So, obviously the laughter doesn't go from Sandringham to Sandton, but that's what it felt like.

And, to top it all, to be coming from a stroke support group?

Well, yes.

Not quite what I had expected, and it wasn't all laughter naturally, but I had been forewarned by George Scola CEO of the Stroke Survivors Foundation, that were some "great characters" in this group.

He's so right. I had a wonderful time and I'm trying to think of an excuse to go back.

Although the group caters mainly for the older folk, according to organiser Sandra Colombick anyone is welcome. And when I say "older" folk (of which I'm one) I don't mean they all walk with Zimmer frames. On the contrary, many are getting their strength back and heading back to the gym.

The group meets every week at the Jabula Recreation Centre in Sandringham. They meet and discuss issues pertinent to the group and there's also speech therapy from a licensed therapist and exercises that help keep that all-important mobility functioning (see video).

What follows is the experience from some of the group members that many stroke survivors everywhere will be able to identify with.

MARIANNE...It started with a headache. I was used to getting migraines, which is what I thought was looming, so I told my husband I was going to take a tablet and lie down for a while. The next thing I woke up in hospital. I'd had a stroke and it was "a bleed" (haemorrhagic stroke). I get confused quite easily. If several people are talking, it's like a complete mess to my mind. I can't sort out who has been saying what. Other than that, I'm fine. (**Terry:** I can attest to that. I would never have been able to identify her as a stroke survivor.) I don't have any of the characteristics that people normally see in stroke survivors. I did have to learn how to walk again and my speech was a problem at first. I was talking the biggest load of rubbish (**Group member:** She still does!). With therapy and patience this was resolved. That will be three years ago this October coming up. I was in hospital for about six weeks and when I got home, they put me in a wheelchair. I didn't like that one bit so as soon as I could I started walking and gradually increased my output daily. Now, I walk like anyone else. I consider myself to be very, very, very lucky!

YETTA...I was busy making supper and suddenly felt a very sharp pain in my shoulder. I went to lie down and when my daughter came home, she took me to hospital, where I they told me I had a stroke! While I was in ER, I had another stroke, so that was two strokes in a matter of hours. That was a couple of years ago. I am feeling fine most of the time although I do have problems with my speech and started to stutter which I never used to do. I'm also losing words and my memory goes for walks on its own sometimes. Talking of walking, I have problems at times with that. I had a wonderful doctor while in hospital. She was an absolute Godsend and a huge part of my getting better. My granddaughter also works at the hospital and she banded all her friends there and gave me as much support as was possible!

FELICITY...I had my stroke just before 9/11. When I came out of ICU, I saw the planes flying into the Twin Towers on TV. I thought I was hallucinating. I was very confused, and I thought that I had something to do with it. It's amazing what your mind does with a stroke! My family has a history of sudden death. I've also handed those genes down to my children, so they must be very careful with regular BP and cholesterol check-ups. My stroke happened on the right side of my brain, so my speech was not affected. When I had my stroke, my partner called the paramedics and they took me to hospital very quickly. This is vital when you've suffered a stroke, so I was very lucky. I still have rehabilitation therapy. I get pain in my neck mainly. People just say I'm a big pain! (**Terry:** much laughter). This support group has been amazing, and the people here have helped me so much. I really feel blessed.

DEMITIRI...My stroke came a real surprise. I have always been fit and just days before the stroke (in October 2018) I was in gym doing weights and cardio exercise. People were telling me that I looked so good there. I got home from the gym and collapsed. I called my wife and son and within an hour I was in hospital and on a drip. If I had lost consciousness, I would have only been found at about 10pm and I would have been a gonner! Someone is looking after me. Initially I couldn't speak, and I lost the use of my right side. With much physiotherapy I have improved enormously and I'm back at gym already.

CHARLES...have you made an appointment? (**Terry:** he asks me, to much laughter. Charles is the real 'character' of the group and I warm to him immediately). I had a heart attack and then about four months later I had a stroke. Not much longer after that I had a second and third stroke. I had been working very hard – the reason I could retire at age 40 and have three paid-up townhouses...this was probably the reason for the heart attacks and strokes. My second and third strokes were bad, and my speech and mobility were badly affected. I have a lovely wife and lovely marriage! I am very proud of my three kinds. One is a corporate attorney, the other is a chartered accountant in London and the youngest son is a rabbi. They are in touch with me all the time. (**Terry:** He puts on a naughty face) ...I also sometimes have a flutter at the casino and the odd whisky! This support group is outstanding. I feel very lucky that I have such great support here and at home.

HENRY...When I had my stroke, I went totally blind. Now, I have partial vision out of one eye. I didn't have good treatment after the stroke and during a procedure they damaged the eye. They tell me it will get better with time, but I have my doubts. I must be very careful with walking because of my deteriorated eyesight which also causes a lot of confusion. My biggest gripe is that I can't read, and being an academic, I used to spend a lot of time reading. It really is awful and there's a big hole in my life. The support with this group is fantastic and I don't know what I'd do without our meetings. I just my hope eyesight improves!

CECIL...I had my stroke in 2003. I was very fit and completed 12 Argus cycling races. Aside from that, I used to spend a lot of time in gym. One night at a restaurant while on holiday my wife said to me that I wasn't looking so good. The next moment I collapsed over the table. I was taken to hospital where I kept on insisting that I was okay, but when the doctor asked me what my name was, I couldn't tell him. The next day my speech was terrible. I struggled with that for quite a while and it's not as bad as it used to be but not totally right either. I can read a computer, books and watch television, so that's great.

Mostly, it's speech that's the problem. The support here is excellent and the group also has a speech therapist who helps enormously.