

Nearly 13 years later, stroke victim thrives

The grim statistics say strokes kill about 140,000 Americans each year. In August of 2006, Mandy Martin was nearly one of them.

Now almost 13 years later, Martin works in the environmental services department at Lawrence County Memorial Hospital. She feels it's her duty to tell her story so that others might not suffer such a close call. Since May is National Stroke Awareness month, this is the perfect time to do so.

After graduating from East Richland High School in 2006, Martin had things planned out. She'd go to Olney Central College for two years, then transfer to the University of Illinois and major in physical therapy.

She had a scholarship, and was working two jobs to help pay for tuition. She was prepared and focused, and started school in August, while continuing to work her jobs.

"Flu season was ahead of us, so I had decided to go ahead and proceed with getting a flu shot like I had done prior, yearly," she said. "Not a big deal."

As August turned to September, though, things took a horrible turn. Martin started to feel sick, then began to feel even worse. It became so bad that she eventually had to drop out of school.

Not only was she suffering from flu-like symptoms, but she had a tremendous pain in her shoulder. With over-the-counter medications providing no relief, Martin made a trip to the emergency room with the pain being "12 on a scale of one to 10." Initially, her symptoms were misdiagnosed. She was told she had bursitis in her shoulder, although her own thoughts were that she might be suffering from a pulled muscle.

A visit to a nurse practitioner soon thereafter resulted in a complete physical, with all the necessary bloodwork. Soon after, an MRI revealed a cyst, the size of a softball, under Martin's right shoulder blade.

Even after surgery to remove the cyst, Martin wasn't getting better. The cyst was found to be filled with MRSA and SEPSIS.

"It was attacking my body and killing my organs and my lungs were filling up with fluid," Martin said.

All the while she was having tiny strokes, although not all of them were diagnosed.

Ultimately she made her way to St. Vincent's Hospital in Indianapolis, where she wound up staying for six weeks.

At one point, Martin was told that she had a 10 percent chance to survive. Furthermore, if she did survive, she was told that she might be "a vegetable."

Her parents were given the opportunity to sign a "Do Not Resuscitate" order. They informed the medical staff that their daughter was a fighter, and would not give up easily.

"Thank God they refused to sign it," she said.

An experimental drug, which at the time was still being tested, in part led to Martin's recovery.

"It worked," she said. "Things were getting better."

Late in the fall, most of the tubes were removed from her body, and she started "to look like myself."

There was still a lot of hard work ahead. Challenging therapy of all kinds — occupational, physical and speech — was next. When she was finally able to walk, her first steps were into the crying eyes of a proud father.

Martin still remembers the date — Nov. 7, 2006 — that she was discharged. On her way out, she high-fived an entire unit of doctors, nurses, therapists and aides.

"The only words I could say was 'Thank you all,'" she said.

She'd arrived at St. Vincent's weighing 130 pounds. She tipped the scales at 95 pounds when she left. A strawberry milkshake on the way home was the first step toward rectifying the situation.

During the process, Martin was told that she'd suffered damage to her lungs, heart and ovaries. There was no guarantee, she was told, that she'd ever be able to have children.

Today daughters Grace, 8, and Jonalyn, 2, are the light of her life, and are living proof that she and her husband, Ronald, could have children.

Maybe sooner, maybe later, Martin plans to return to school. She wants to take classes "a little at a time" and earn a business degree.

In the meantime, she's on a mission to spread the work about stroke prevention.

"People can overcome a lot. I'm proof of that," she said. "But people need to act quickly if they're having any sign of a stroke. They need to get to a doctor, right away."

Lawrence County Memorial Hospital CEO Don Robbins says that Martin, who has worked there for going on a year, has been "an inspiration."

"I'm glad she's here and willing to share her story," Robbins said. "I know her goal is to get people to where they don't ignore the symptoms of a stroke. At the end of the day, that's what she's all about."