

STROKE MATTERS

WINTER 2024-25

Minnesota Stroke Association



After my stroke,
I thought my life
was over
-Kevin pg.6

Letter from the Chief Executive Officer

By David King



Dear *Stroke Matters* readers,

As the year draws to a close and the crisp air of fall settles in, I find myself reflecting on the simple joys that bring us together. One of those joys, for me, has been spending Friday evenings playing pickleball with my daughter. These sessions are not just about the game, but about staying active, sharing laughter, and embracing moments that keep us connected and feeling young. It's a reminder of the importance of balance and resilience in both our personal lives and the work we do

at the Minnesota Stroke Association.

I'm pleased to share that our recent **Minnesota Statewide Stroke Conference**, held on November 7 at the Heritage Center in Brooklyn Center, was a tremendous success as stroke professionals from across Minnesota came together to learn, grow, and discuss the latest advancements in stroke treatment and prevention strategies. Among the many highlights of the day was the Keynote Address by Dr. Eliza Miller "Stroke in Women Across the Life Course: Sex and Gender Specific Factors." Dr. Miller provided insight on stroke risks unique to women, including pregnancy-related factors, hormonal influences, and conditions like hypertension and atrial fibrillation that affect women differently. Thank you to everyone who participated in the Minnesota Statewide Stroke Conference and I hope to see you at the next one!

As we look forward to the new year, I'd like to encourage you to consider becoming a **Citizen Advocate**. Whether you're a stroke survivor, caregiver, or professional, your story can make a difference in shaping policies that support those affected by stroke in Minnesota. From participating in **Tuesdays at the Capitol** to joining us for **Disability Day**, there are many ways to get involved and ensure your voice is heard. For more information on how you can contribute, our Public Policy team is here to guide and support you every step of the way. Visit strokemn.org to learn more.

In this issue of *Stroke Matters*, we are proud to feature two profiles in resilience about individuals who transformed their adversity into advocacy. Michelle Lang and Kevin Rhinehart are two stroke survivors who turned their challenges into opportunities to help others. Through their personal recoveries, they found new purpose – creating support networks and resources for others navigating life after stroke. Their stories are a testament to the power of resilience and the difference one person can make in the lives of many.

As we approach the holiday season, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude for your continued support of the Minnesota Stroke Association. Your generosity enables us to provide essential services, education, and advocacy for those affected by stroke. If you're considering year-end giving, know that your contribution will directly impact the lives of stroke survivors and their families across Minnesota. Visit strokemn.org to make your donation and make a difference in the lives of stroke survivors.

Together, we are making strides – not just in stroke recovery, but in the joyful moments that connect us all.

I'll see you on the court!

Warmest regards,

David King

CEO

Minnesota Stroke Association

TAKE A QUICK MOMENT

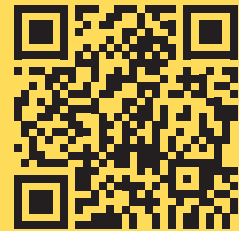
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Providing Inspiration Following a Stroke

By Nancy Christensen,
Administrative Assistant

Stroke survivors have many interesting and inspiring stories to tell, and many have helped advocate not just for themselves but for others as well. Their stories not only highlight the personal journeys of stroke survivors but also emphasize the importance of advocacy and community support in the recovery process.

The Minnesota Stroke Association has advocacy stories, but one that particularly stands out to me is the impact that Karen Bjorgan had on stroke survivors in Minnesota. One day in 1992, Karen was experiencing the worst headache of her life, a common symptom of stroke. At the time, she held a lucrative position at Wells Fargo in downtown Minneapolis. She had just given birth three weeks earlier but soon began experiencing extreme pain. After multiple visits to the emergency room, she found herself waking up in the hospital, unable to speak. She had suffered a stroke at the age of 32 and developed aphasia, a comprehension and communication disorder. She didn't recognize her husband or her brand-new baby. She had weakness on her right side and problems with balance.

After spending 50 days in Methodist Hospital Stroke Center, where she had to learn to walk, talk, and take care of herself and her young family, she was finally able to go home. Stroke affects 800,000 Americans each year and is more common in women than in men. As we know, strokes can happen at any age and can occur in otherwise healthy people, which is why it is important to get regular physicals and be aware of stroke risk factors, including smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes. Taking birth control pills and pregnancy can also be rare, but possible, risk factors.

Two years after her stroke, Karen started a support group. She continued working for Wells Fargo for a few years while continuing her outreach. At this point, it was clear that stroke support was needed, so she collaborated with Methodist Hospital and, as a volunteer, ran an inpatient support group. She had a clear vision, and her passion for helping and advocating for stroke survivors was undeniable. Eventually, the demand for support groups grew into well-attended evening support groups. Karen requested and received startup funds from the

annual Park Nicollet Gala, and from that, the Stroke Inspire Program was born, with Karen becoming the director. This group became the root of Park Nicollet's INSPIRE program, which Karen and a team of doctors and therapists launched in 1997.

INSPIRE offers support, education, and hope to stroke survivors and their families. There are support groups for caregivers, a coffee group to talk about recovery, a chat group to build speech skills, and a program to connect stroke survivors with others facing similar experiences. INSPIRE also provides a neurological learning center to help people find information about strokes, whether in books, audiotapes, or online. Additionally, INSPIRE connects survivors with social workers and offers classes and conferences.

Even though Karen is more than 20 years into her stroke recovery, she hasn't forgotten what it felt like. "Isolation is the enemy in stroke recovery," she says. "The key is to find a community where you feel comfortable. They can help you move to the next level of recovery. And they can help you gain purpose. That's why INSPIRE exists."

Recently, Karen retired, but her legacy will always be the powerful impact she had on so many people.



If you or someone you know is looking for support, you can always reach out to our team of resource specialists, who can assist you in finding groups like the INSPIRE program in your community.



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Thank you
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Imagine A Minnesota where everyone understands the impact stroke can have – not only on individuals but on families, friends, and communities.

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A Minnesota where everyone recognizes the intrinsic value of all people living with stroke.

This is the vision the Minnesota Stroke Association works toward every day; but we can't do it without you.

The Minnesota Stroke Association has expanded its services to reach more Minnesotans than ever before. Through online resources, remote support, and innovative educational tools, we've made sure that no matter where someone lives or what challenges they face, they have access to the care, knowledge and guidance they need. But we still have a long way to go, and your

involvement is crucial to keeping these life-changing services accessible and available to those who need them.

As demand for our services increases, so do the costs of maintaining and expanding these vital resources. We are determined to continue being there for every Minnesotan affected by stroke – but we need your help to make that happen.

A gift of \$50, \$100, \$250, or whatever feels meaningful to you can make a world of difference. Your contribution ensures that our advocacy efforts, educational programs, and volunteer training continue to reach communities across the state. With your support, we can empower individuals to navigate the challenges of stroke recovery with confidence.

Now is the time to take action.

Your generosity today helps us build a future where no one faces stroke alone. Please donate to the Minnesota Stroke Association at strokenm.org/donate, or scan the code above or call 763-553-0088.

Your support truly changes lives.



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I Attribute My Good Looks To Heavy Metal Music

By Phil Gonzales, Public Awareness Associate



face looked odd. Unbeknownst to him at the time, he had suffered a serious ischemic stroke.

All at once, Kevin was left with severe challenges: his speech was lost, his right side was paralyzed, and he struggled with receptive aphasia, making it difficult to process language.

“After my stroke, I thought my life was over,” Kevin says. “I couldn’t talk, I couldn’t walk, and typing was hard because the letters seemed like gibberish.”

At age 53, Kevin Rhinehart’s life took an unexpected turn. A psychotherapist and heavy metal bassist, Kevin was used to helping others and spending his free time immersed in the world of music.

And then, as he puts it, “In the space of one heartbeat, my life changed.”

On January 24, 2012, a piece of plaque broke off in Kevin’s left carotid artery. After work, Kevin’s son invited him to join a workout session when, shortly into it, Kevin suddenly felt exhausted and laid down right on the floor. He found he couldn’t walk or talk, and his



Kevin’s recovery journey was anything but easy. He spent time in a rehab hospital, grappling with the loss of his previous life and the daunting task of rebuilding his abilities. But Kevin wasn’t content with just returning to a semblance of his old life. He knew he needed to reinvent himself, and his newfound determination led him to reinvent the way he helped others.

I had the pleasure of meeting Kevin at the Mall of America when he was in town for the 32-mile Tour de Pepin bicycle race between Lake City, Minnesota and Stockholm, Wisconsin. Despite his careful movement and precise way of speaking, he burst with excitement and energy.

As I mentioned, before the stroke Kevin’s life was filled with music. He was a bass player in a heavy metal progressive band called Kilmer. Music was his passion, and performing live at small venues was a significant

part of his identity. Despite being immersed in the rock music world, Kevin was a responsible drinker and stayed away from drugs, even though they were prevalent in the scene.

Kevin's stroke forced him to quit his psychotherapy practice, a career he loved, helping people find healing from emotional and psychological wounds. His stroke also meant that he could no longer play his bass guitar due to the loss of control in his right hand.

"I was a finger-style player, and music was my life. I spent my free time playing gigs and connecting with people through music. And I had to leave that behind. I couldn't hold a pick."

The abrupt end to his career and musical pursuits was a deep loss, but it also fueled his determination to find his new purpose.

Kevin's journey of recovery was long, arduous, and beset with challenges beyond the physical. He underwent speech, occupational, and physical therapy both in the hospital and as an outpatient. When he could no longer afford therapy, he relied on the generosity of health providers who offered significant discounts, some as much as 100 percent. With encouragement from the Idaho State University Speech and Language Program, he helped start an Aphasia Stroke Recovery Support Program for stroke survivors.

"I needed to reinvent my life," he says. "After I went through the grief process, I thought, 'What do I want my life to stand for?' Well, I will help stroke survivors."

Despite not being athletic before his stroke, as he slowly began to recover he decided to focus on getting his body in better shape. With encouragement and help from his wife, two sons, friends and colleagues, he started going on bike rides, lifting light weights, and swimming. Over time, he found that he could increase the length and intensity of his workouts.

Once his physical health started improving, Kevin founded the Aphasia Stroke Survivors Support Group in Boise, Idaho. The group provided a space for survivors to connect, share their experiences, and support one

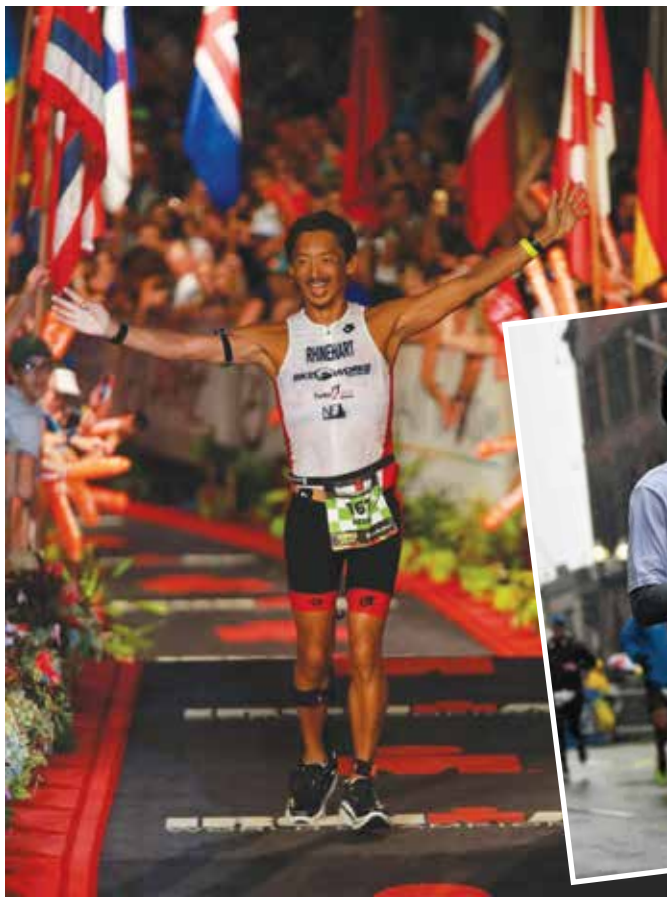
another. It became a lifeline for many, offering not just resources but a sense of community and understanding. Kevin's journey of reinvention didn't stop there. In 2015, while living in Kona, Hawaii, Kevin discovered a new passion: triathlons. He had moved to Hawaii after his wife was offered a job there as a surgical technician, and on October 10, 2015, Kevin volunteered at the



Ironman World Championships in Kona. The energy of the event was infectious, and it sparked a new goal in Kevin's mind.

Despite his physical disabilities, and being 56 years old, Kevin began training. In just two months, he entered a sprint triathlon on Thanksgiving Day 2015. The experience was transformative and hooked him on a new path.

"When I started training, this thing kept coming into my head – stroke survivors can. I wanted to prove to myself that my life was not over, and I wanted to show other stroke survivors that their lives are not over either."



Kevin was connected with Alec Wendelboe, the Education and Community Outreach Coordinator, who recognized Kevin’s potential as a speaker and saw his story as an excellent example of how the Association collaborates with individuals to help bring resources to their communities.

“Don’t settle for what I call being a victim. ‘Oh, well, this has happened to me and my life is over’ because it’s not. You have all sorts of things to live for. Sure, there’s grief, but with support, you can restore your life and set new directions that make a difference to yourself and the world around you,” Kevin says. Despite the challenges of running a nonprofit with no paid employees, Kevin’s passion and determination have kept the organization thriving. His story is about more than just his personal achievements; it’s about lifting others up and helping them find their own paths to recovery.

Returning to Idaho in 2018, Kevin’s focus shifted to establishing a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting stroke survivors and their families. Recalling the phrase that accompanied him during the restructuring of his life, he founded Stroke Survivors CAN!, a nonprofit with the slogan “Restoring Lives, Setting New Directions.” The organization’s mission is to help stroke survivors begin to live fully again, providing free support groups, resources, and guidance.

Kevin’s organization now provides not only support groups but also educational resources and connections to speech-language pathology programs. He’s also working on building relationships with local universities and hospitals to expand the reach of his services.

“We’re just in our infancy, really, but I want to give stroke survivors hope and help them restore their dreams, to show them that there’s life after a stroke.”

Kevin first connected with the Minnesota Stroke Association while searching for stroke information for his organization.

“I found your website and thought, ‘Wow. I want to be like them. I sent out a general email that I was passing through the area and said ‘I want to pick your brain!’”

Kevin’s journey from stroke survivor to community leader is a testament to resilience, reinvention, and the power of community. He continues to participate in triathlons, not just for his own satisfaction but to inspire others to find their own version of a triathlon – whether that’s regaining mobility, learning to speak again, or simply finding joy in life after a stroke.

“Don’t get distracted by me doing a triathlon. It’s what got me noticed, but there’s so much more. It’s about finding your own passion, your own life vision – something that motivates you to achieve more than you thought possible. If you’re in a wheelchair and you’re working on moving your foot, then move it. That’s your triathlon.”

And where does Kevin find the energy to keep going? He attributes his persistence to his commitment to helping others and, as he says, “I attribute my looks to heavy metal music.”

Kevin Rhinehart’s story is one of transformation, not just for himself but for the many lives he has touched along the way. Through his work, he continues to show that life after stroke is not just about surviving – it’s about thriving, finding new purpose, and helping others do the same. **SM**



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SOLITUDE *to* SUPPORT

Michelle Lang's Mission to Connect Stroke Survivors

By Phil Gonzales, Public Awareness Associate

When Michelle Lang suffered a stroke on the morning of April 30, 2023, her entire world got thrown off its axis. A gymnastics and Ninja coach and former heavy equipment operator, Michelle was used to a life of constant movement, of exertion and confidence. And, at 58 years old, she considered herself to be pretty healthy.

But as she stood outside on her front porch, enjoying her early morning cigarette and cup of coffee, Michelle suddenly felt nauseated and weak in the legs. She didn't realize that this moment would become a tipping point, not only in her own life but in the lives of many others.

"I went down to my knees and I couldn't get back up," she recalls, "I just didn't know what was wrong. But my phone was up on the porch so I dragged myself back up

so I could call my husband, Jon, and he thought it was a prank call because my speech was so garbled."

Michelle's stroke was the culmination of factors she hadn't fully acknowledged – unchecked high blood pressure, smoking, and a busy lifestyle that often sacrificed healthy eating for convenience.

"I thought I was healthy, because I was go go go all the time. Little did I realize that my lifestyle was setting me up for the perfect storm to have a stroke."

In the days and weeks that followed, Michelle's life became a whirlwind of medical interventions and rehabilitation. Transferred from Fairview Wyoming to the University of Minnesota's Acute Rehabilitation Center, she began the arduous journey of regaining control over her body and mind. Physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy replaced gymnastics and socializing, while her nights were often spent grappling with the emotional weight of a new reality.

"It took me a while to realize that I had actually had a stroke," she says, "I think I was in denial. I was stubborn and pig-headed – I feel bad for the staff, the therapy staff at U of M hospital, because I thought I was getting up and walking around. I didn't realize how much they were helping me. I wanted to go, go, go because I just wanted to get out of there."

Michelle's stroke was not her first major health battle. Michelle is also a breast cancer survivor, having undergone a double mastectomy 17 years ago, six months after the birth of her second daughter, Anna.

"I had wanted to start a support group for that because I made it through cancer, I made it through chemo, so you know I wanted to give back and help others. But





I was trying to work full-time and raise a family and I couldn't find the time."

As Michelle worked through her recovery, she began to notice something else: a profound sense of isolation. The stroke had not only taken a toll on her physically but had also severed her from the community and activities that once defined her. It was during this time that Michelle realized she was not alone in this experience.

After being released from the hospital, Michelle had been connected to Diane in the Minnesota Stroke Association's Resource Facilitation program, which provided her with essential support during her recovery. Michelle soon realized that many stroke survivors were facing the same challenges she was currently facing: isolation and a dearth of resources in her area, including support groups.

Michelle decided that if she couldn't find a support group near her home in Chisago City, she would create one. Armed with determination and the help of her family, Jon, Anna and her older daughter Jennilee, she started organizing meetings, reaching out to others in similar situations.

"I did a little bit of research through the American Stroke Association and I talked with Fairview Wyoming to see if I could get the space for them to allow us to use it. The group is not affiliated with Fairview but they allow us to use their space. And I had my daughter help me do a flier and I posted a bunch of them."

At the first meeting in December of 2023, only Michelle showed up.

"I like to joke that there were three people: me, myself, and I. But I didn't give up. I knew what I needed, but my needs might be different from somebody else's. So, I asked, 'What do you guys need? What do you guys want to get from this?' Because stroke is so different for everybody."

Taking the needs of the stroke community into consideration, Michelle began shaping the group with topics and speakers that could provide education as well as emotional support. In just a few months, Michelle's solitary meetings grew into a vibrant community. At their last meeting, they had 31 people. Dr. Haitham Hussein, a neurologist, was the guest speaker, and they've had others like Chris Larkin, an occupational therapist from Fairview, Wyoming.

The group's success reflects Michelle's resilience and commitment to helping others navigate their post-stroke lives. It also highlights a broader theme: how individuals who have faced life-altering experiences often turn their trauma into resources for others. By creating this support network, Michelle has not only aided her own recovery but has provided hope for others in her community.

"I'm unable to work. I haven't worked in a year. But I needed to do something productive because I think so many stroke survivors feel like you're not a productive member of society when you can't do things."

Looking ahead, Michelle has big plans for the group. She's training her new puppy to become a therapy dog, hoping to bring him to group meetings and local rehabilitation centers to provide comfort to other stroke survivors. She also has a full calendar of guest speakers and social activities lined up, ensuring that the group continues to grow and thrive.

In May of 2024, Michelle was recognized at the Minnesota Stroke Association Strides for Stroke walk for her efforts in building Chisago City's support community.

Michelle's journey is one of transformation – from a stroke survivor grappling with her new reality to a community leader who has created a resource for others.

As the Chisago City Stroke Support Group continues to grow, it stands as a testament to the power of community, resilience, and the human spirit's capacity to turn adversity into strength. And where does Michelle find the energy to get all of this done? She laughs and admits, "I know I get fatigued pretty easily, so a little nap every now and then certainly helps." It's this balance of perseverance and self-care that keeps Michelle moving forward, turning her challenges into opportunities to help others. [SM](#)

"I feel like this has just grown so much it has given me so much to keep going. It's kept me occupied and it's been something that's given me a sense of purpose."





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Twin Cities



BRAIN INJURY ANNUAL CONFERENCE

April

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STRIDES FOR STROKES

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Duluth, Saint Cloud, and Twin Cities

Visit these websites for more information on the above events.



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