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I had a stroke aged eight



Ryan Dixon, who suffered a stroke at the age of eight

Rugby-playing Ryan collapsed at home

Brave boy wins award for his courage

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REALLIFESTORY



The boy who suffered a stroke at the age of eight

A fit and healthy youngster suddenly suffered a stroke, since been found to have been caused by a very rare condition. AASMA DAY talks to his mum to find out more about his story and why she wants to raise awareness that strokes can strike people of any age, even children

Rugby mad youngster Ryan Dixon had always been fit and sporty with no health issues.

When he became unwell and sickly earlier this year, he thought he just had a bug which he would soon recover from.

But when Ryan, who lives in Lostock Hall, near Preston, literally fell out of bed one morning and revealed he could not use his leg, his mum Carolynne became alarmed and recognised the signs of a stroke as her own dad had suffered one years earlier.

Carolynne, 45, who is married to Lee and also has a son Sam, 14, recalls: "Ryan became ill in the middle of January this year and he was constantly sick and we initially thought he had a bug but he did not have a temperature.

"It went on for a few days and Ryan would pick up a little and then go downhill again.

"Ryan then complained of tummy ache so I took him to the GP who examined him but could not find anything wrong and told us to come back if he didn't improve.

"I don't think anyone could have predicted what was going to happen."

A few days later, Carolynne heard a thud in Ryan's bedroom at around 7:30am and went in to find him lying on the floor.

She remembers: "I asked Ryan what he was doing on the floor and told him to get ready for school.

"But Ryan told me he could not get up and the reason he



Ryan Dixon at the Life After Stroke Awards

had fallen out of bed was because he could not stand on his left leg.

"I lifted Ryan up off the floor and his left leg was turned in and he collapsed back down again.

"I shouted for my husband and we carried Ryan downstairs. It was the way Ryan was holding his left leg and the way it was turned inwards that was worrying me.

"I said to my husband: 'That's how my dad held his leg when he had a stroke.'

The couple called 111 and they sent paramedics. Carolynne asked them if it was possible that Ryan had suffered a stroke or a mini stroke but they didn't seem to think this was the case.

Carolynne says: "They said if it was a stroke, it would be

the first in 20 years they had seen as it was very rare in children.

"I would never have thought of it myself if it wasn't for the fact the way Ryan held his leg reminded me of my dad when he had a stroke."

Ryan and his parents went to hospital and on the way there, the feeling started returning in Ryan's leg.

While they were in A&E at Royal Preston Hospital, Ryan experienced a period of confusion as he had some Match Attax cards but he was unable to lay them out straight.

He was checked over at A&E but by this point he was walking on his leg again so doctors did not think it was anything serious and discharged him.

However, on the way back

to the car park, Ryan displayed some alarming symptoms. Carolynne explains: "On the way to the car park, Ryan began walking into the wall.

"He could not walk straight and was veering to the left.

"He looked spaced out and confused so I held out my fingers and asked him how many I was holding up but he could not tell me.

"We took him straight back to A&E and they transferred us to the children's ward."

An MRI scan confirmed Ryan had had an ischaemic stroke.

Carolynne says: "When they told us Ryan had suffered a stroke, it was a huge shock even though I'd started suspected a stroke.

"They carried out tests on him and discovered he had extremely high blood pressure. They put him on medication for it as it was so high."

Ryan was put on aspirin to thin his blood and underwent lots of tests to see what caused the stroke but doctors couldn't get to the bottom of it.

Ryan was discharged after six days and an outreach nurse came to the home to regularly check his blood pressure.

Ryan returned to Lever House Primary School in February but his parents weren't prepared for the extreme tiredness that would hit Ryan.

Carolynne explains: "We could not believe how tired Ryan was. He went to school and only lasted an hour at first as his teacher could see he was not going to be able to function more than that.

"Ryan had a phased return

to school and gradually built it up over a period of weeks.

"His teacher is absolutely fantastic and came up with a timetable for Ryan including extra rest and snack breaks and this worked a treat.

"The whole school has been amazing and we could not have asked for better from them.

"A couple of Ryan's friends visited him when he was in hospital and the whole school made get well cards for him.

"Ryan is now much better with fatigue than he was but he is still tired at the end of the week and at weekends."

In March, Ryan had another MRI scan to look for a cause behind the stroke. His consultant at Preston sent the MRI scan to different consultants around the country to see if anyone could shed light on why the stroke had happened.

It was actually a consult-



Ryan is a keen rugby player



Ryan Dixon, from Lostock Hall, who had a stroke

ant at Great Ormond Street Hospital who realised what it was.

Ryan has been diagnosed with a very rare condition called PRES (posterior reversible encephalopathy syndrome) which caused his stroke.

Carolynne says: "It is a very rare condition which caused Ryan's blood pressure to go really high and this caused the stroke."

Ryan is now physically fine but is still on aspirin to thin his blood.

Ryan, who is a keen rugby player and plays for the under-sevens at Leyland Warriors, was told by doctors he couldn't play rugby for six months so he has missed this season.

However, he is itching to get back to rugby and is hoping to return in the new season.

Ryan, who absolutely loves



Over 400 child strokes in a year

- There are more than 400 childhood strokes a year in the UK
- Around a quarter of these are in children under a year old, half are in children aged one to 10 and a quarter are in children aged 11 and over
- A stroke is a brain attack which happens when the blood supply to the brain is cut off caused by a clot or bleeding in the brain
- There are more than 100,000 strokes in the UK each year - that is around one stroke every five minutes
- There are over 1.2m stroke survivors in the UK
- The Stroke Association is a charity who believe in life after stroke and that together we can conquer stroke. They work directly with stroke survivors and their families and carers, with health and social care professionals and with scientists and researchers
- For more information about childhood stroke and the support available, visit the Stroke Association on www.stroke.org.uk or call the helpline on 0303 303 3100

...stroke earlier this year but has recovered well. Inset top - Ryan and his older brother Sam and, inset right - with the family pet

Lego, has become even more fascinated by it since his stroke as he became more intent on Lego when he was unable to do anything else.

As a result of his stroke, Ryan is suffering from anxiety, which is understandable as he has been through a massive trauma.

Carolyne says: "Ryan is anxious about going to bed. We think this is because the stroke happened after he went to bed."

"It is almost like Ryan has reverted back to being a toddler as he has separation anxiety and won't let me leave him in a room on his own. He likes to know we are in sight."

"I think he has a fear of something happening to him when we are not there."

Ironically, Ryan raised money for the Stroke Association even before he had his stroke.

Carolyne says: "I have

followed the Stroke Association as a charity for a long time because of my dad having had a stroke.

"Ryan's older brother chose to raise money for the Stroke Association and Ryan helped him - but this was before he had a stroke himself."

"Strokes can happen to anyone of any age for so many different reasons."

"I am now in touch with a few parents of children who have had strokes. Everyone has a different cause and different recovery."

"As a parent, your child having a stroke is something you never expect to go through."

"But having come through it, I do feel we are lucky and have come out of it lightly as other people who have strokes are left with disabilities."

Ryan has received a Highly Commended Life

After Stroke Award from the Stroke Association in recognition of his courage after stroke.

Carolyne nominated Ryan for the Stroke Association's Child Courage Award. He received his Highly Commended certificate at the Holiday Inn in Liverpool city centre. The event was supported by Randox Health.

His certificate was presented by former Liverpool FC footballer David Fairclough alongside Prof Tony Rudd, National Clinical director for stroke with NHS England and the charity's chief executive officer Juliet Bouvarie.

Chris Larkin, director for the Stroke Association in the north says: "A stroke happens in an instant and often changes lives forever."

"We were thrilled that so many local people across the North West were nominated

to receive a Life After Stroke Award.

"Our regional event highlights the tremendous courage people like little Ryan have shown in rebuilding their lives after a stroke or in helping others do the same."

The Stroke Association's Life After Stroke Awards recognise the courage shown by stroke survivors and carers as well as the great work and commitment shown by health professionals, groups and supporter organisations.

For more details, visit: www.stroke.org.uk/LASA



REAL LIFE STORY



'I'd just been out for a 30-mile bike ride when I realised I was having a stroke'

Many people mistakenly believe strokes only strike older people. Phil Woodford knows only too well this is a myth as he suddenly suffered a stroke at the age of 45 and is now re-building his life. He tells AASMA DAY his story.

After cycling for 30 miles, as he did every Saturday morning, Phil Woodford sat in the garden relaxing and enjoying a drink of water.

However, he suddenly found he could not see out of his left eye and felt confused. Phil, 46, who lives in Garstang explains: "It was like there was a torch light shining in front of my eye.

"I blinked a lot and started feeling nauseous and I headed back into the house."

Phil sat down at the kitchen table with his daughter and her friend and told them he was not feeling right.

Phil says: "They were giggling and I did not know why. I later found out it was because I was slurring and water was coming out of the side of my mouth and they thought I was just messing around."

Phil, who lives with his girlfriend Shana Henriques and has two daughters aged seven and 13, says the symptoms carried on for a few minutes before he started realising something serious was wrong.

Phil, who is associate director of corporate affairs at University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Trust, says: "The first thing I thought of was a heart attack - but I didn't have any pain in my chest or arms.

"I knew about the FAST campaign around strokes



Phil Woodford enjoying being visited by his youngest daughter in hospital.

and my step-father had a stroke a number of years ago so I knew about the signs and I started suspecting that was what was happening to me.

"Even though I could only see out of one eye, I picked up my mobile phone and googled: 'Signs of a stroke' and shouted for my girlfriend and she called an ambulance."

The ambulance arrived in minutes and Phil says the paramedic crew were superb in how they dealt with him and after hearing his symptoms, they realised it may be a stroke and took him to the Royal Preston Hospital.

Phil was given a brain scan and although his eyesight and speech was slowly coming back, his left arm

was getting weak which was concerning medics and he was admitted for observation.

The following morning, Phil felt fine and decided he would discharge himself.

He says: "I had entered a cycle race that day and thought I would head home and then go and do the race.

"I went for a shower at the hospital but while I was in there, I realised I did not have any soap.

"I saw some hand gel and reached out for it thinking that would do. I remember stretching out and then my balance went and my left leg went up in the air and I fell to the floor.

"When I tried to get up to pull the cord, I found I couldn't sit up

Stroke facts

- There are more than 100,000 strokes in the UK each year - that is around one stroke every five minutes
- There are more than 1.2m stroke survivors in the UK
- Stroke is a leading cause of disability in the UK - almost two-thirds of stroke survivors leave hospital with a disability
- Around a quarter of strokes happen in people of working age
- Men are at higher risk of

having a stroke at a younger age than women

● The Stroke Association Helpline provides information and support on strokes. Call: 0303 303 3100 or visit: www.stroke.org.uk

● Different Strokes is run by younger stroke survivors for younger stroke survivor and has personal experience of the realities of life after stroke. Visit: www.differentstrokes.co.uk

and I felt confused and upset and thought it was because I wasn't fit enough.

"I started shouting for help but my voice was very weak.

"I managed to get to one of my shoes and used it to bang on the wall.

"The shower was running and I was lying there thinking I would drown.

"Then I heard voices and hospital staff opened the door and I explained what had happened."

Phil says the quick thinking of a nurse called Beth

saved his life as she recognised he had suffered a stroke.

Phil says: "She told me she thought I had suffered a stroke as my face had drooped on one side and I had quite severe weakness.

"I was taken back to the emergency department and had a brain scan.

"The doctor then told me there was a clot and they gave me thrombolysis medication to break it up.

"I had a right-sided ischaemic stroke which affected the left side of my body.

"I completely lost use of the left side of my body from my neck down. I couldn't sit up and my speech was slurred."

Phil says doctors still don't know why he suffered two strokes in one week-end at the age of 45. They suspect it could have been



Phil Woodford playing the guitar before his girlfriend and two children, right.

caused by the side effect of prescribed medication for arthritis which Phil has been taking since his early 20s.

After a week at Royal Preston Hospital, Phil made the decision to be transferred to the Royal Lancaster Infirmary for his rehabilitation.

Phil explains: "I wanted to be closer to my family and with me working as a hospital manager at Morecambe Bay Hospitals, I felt I should demonstrate how much I trust my colleagues and receive my care there."

The day Phil was admitted to Lancaster, his beloved dog Vale, a Weimaraner, was taken to the vets for surgery to have his ear removed as it had a lump which turned out to be cancerous.

When Phil told the sister on his ward about his dog, they arranged for the dog to come to the hospital garden and wheeled Phil out in a wheelchair so he could see him.

Phil says: "We both went through life-changing health issues at the same time and when I went home from



stroke. He is determined to play again one day; and enjoying a lunch out with his

hospital, while my girlfriend was at work and my children were at school, it would just be the dog and me.

"I would tell Vale how I was feeling. He was my unofficial therapist."

Phil spent three months in hospital having intensive physiotherapy and it took about a month for him to get his first movements back.

He was discharged from hospital in October last year and was given a package of care at home as he was not able to wash or dress himself.

Phil says: "When I was first discharged home, I could walk with a walking stick, but not very far."

"I can now walk without my walking stick although I do trip up a lot and stub my toes."

"I can't do anything requiring fine motor skills such as doing up the buttons on my shirt or cutting my food up."

"I can't use a keyboard so I use digital dictation at work."

It has now been just over a year since Phil suffered his strokes and he says that although he still hasn't re-

gained all his physical skills, it is the mental challenges that have been the hardest to deal with.

Phil explains: "I remain devastated that I had a stroke at the age of 45."

"It changes not just the survivor's life overnight but also their family's."

"I woke up that Saturday with plans to do a bike ride the following day and we were due to go on holiday a couple of weeks later and suddenly everything changed and I could no longer feed myself or even go to the toilet."

"I had never had bad or negative thoughts before but I started feeling suicidal as I could not see much of a future."

"What I really struggled with was that I was thinking this way."

"I also became emotionally labile and would cry at anything."

While Phil praises the NHS for the treatment of his stroke, he says the thing that is lacking is the psychological support.

He says: "I have got a lot of my physical movement back



but I feel like I have lost part of my life.

"I saw my GP and told her about the suicidal thoughts and she referred me for mental health support but it was rejected and they just said to adjust my anti-depressants."

"I ended up going private to the Priory in Bury and it has been a bit of a lifesaver as they have really helped me and realised I had aspects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and severe depression."

"I have been treated with talking therapies and I feel more positive about the future."

"It will be a different future from the one I imagined, but I feel more positive."

"For a while, I felt like a failure, but I have got over that now."

"I can't ride my bike, but I am confident I will get there and riding a recumbent trike is a new experience and getting me outside."

"I haven't been able to play the guitar since my stroke - but I am determined I will one day."

"There is one good thing that has come out of the stroke and that is it has made me realise the important things in life."

"I spend much more time with my children and am happier."

"I feel no guilt about leaving work on time any more as your health needs to come first."

What is a stroke?

A stroke is a serious life-threatening medical condition which occurs when the blood supply to part of the brain is cut off.

Strokes are a medical emergency and urgent treatment is essential.

The sooner a person receives treatment for a stroke, the less damage is likely to happen.

If you suspect that you or someone else is having a stroke, phone 999 immediately and ask for an ambulance.

The main symptoms of stroke can be remembered with the word F.A.S.T:-

- **FACE** - the face may have dropped on one side, the person may not be able to smile, or their mouth or eye may have dropped.

- **ARMS** - the person with suspected stroke may not be able to lift both arms and keep them there because of weakness or numbness in one arm.

- **SPEECH** - their speech may be slurred or garbled, or the person may not be able to talk at all despite appearing to be awake.

- **TIME** - it's time to dial 999 immediately if you see any of these signs or symptoms.

An Everyday Superhero

Phil Woodford has been named an "Everyday Superhero" by Superhero Series - the UK's only sports series for the UK's 12.9m people with disabilities and long-term injuries and their friends and families.

Phil will be taking on a new mission in December: nPower Winter Wonderwheels, the latest annual event from Superhero Series.

A keen cyclist before his stroke, exercise, and particularly Phil's recumbent bike, has played a central role in his recovery. He cycled 200 miles in Holland earlier this year and he took part in Superhero Series' debut event Superhero Tri.

Phil says: "It is possible to retrain and 're-wire' your brain through what scientists call neuroplasticity."

"I've worked really hard at this and practice repetitive movements and exercise every day. Cycling has helped retrain my brain to use my left leg and arm as I used to."

"nPower Winter Wonderwheels offers a great goal to work towards and keeps me motivated."

nPower Wonderwheels will take place on December 3 at Dorney Lake, Windsor, and participants can fly solo or unite with a team to cycle, run, walk or be pushed around three different lakeside distances: The Lakeside Dash (one km), Once Around The Lake (five km) and Twice Around The Lake (10km). All solo entrants and at least one team member must consider themselves to have a disability to enter.

Phil will be joined at nPower Winter Wonderwheels by many celebrity team captains from the Last Leg's Adam Hills to Paralympic champion Sophie Christiansen.

The emphasis is very much on fun and masks and capes are encouraged.

Phil has had an avatar cartoon created of him as a superhero to show him as an "Everyday Superhero."

- To find out more, visit: www.superheroeseries.co.uk

Phil has done a lot of fundraising for stroke care and raised more than £1,400 for the stroke rehabilitation ward at Royal Lancaster Infirmary.