

Ten years later, a former surgeon reflects on post-stroke life

BY SUSAN LAZURAK, THE PROVINCE MAY 8, 2011



Dr. Graham Bryce is a recipient of Courage to Come Back award in the medical category.

Photograph by: Arlen Redekop, PNG

On the day Dr. Graham Bryce's life changed forever, he had, as usual, cycled to work at St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver.

In December 2000 Bryce was a 44-year-old fit and healthy father of three school age girls. As an ear, nose and throat surgeon, and head of the hospital's otorhinolgy division, he had a thriving practice, specializing in ear disease.

"I was seeing the last patient and I was sitting on a wheeled stool and I just dropped to the floor," he said last month in the living room of his Vancouver home he shares with his wife, also a doctor.

"Next thing I knew I was lying on the floor and I could hear the call for a 'code blue'" emergency resuscitation, he recalled.

"I remember thinking I was too young for this, that the code blue couldn't have been for

me,” he said. “I said to one of my colleagues, if you could just help me up.”

He had suffered a stroke caused by an infection and the blood supply was cut off to part of his brain. He needed surgery to have most of the right side of his brain removed, which has now limited mobility on the left side of his body and ended his career as a surgeon.

No longer licensed to practise medicine, Bryce spends his time advocating for hearing health, mostly on a volunteer basis, which has earned him a Courage to Come Back Award in the medical category.

“I’ve had to build a whole new life,” he said. “It was a change in my identity. My life is very different from what I anticipated. People don’t anticipate this happening and until you’re there and you face whatever challenges, you don’t know how you’re going to respond.”

He quoted former B.C. premier Mike Harcourt, who was partially disabled when he injured his spine in a fall from his cottage deck years ago. “He calls it Plan B. It’s my Plan B. I have a good life but it’s different.

“I have a wonderful family and have lots of good people in my life and things that I value to do,” he said.

Before his stroke, Bryce loved windsurfing, skiing, fishing and other active pursuits with his family, and he was at the peak of his professional career.

After surgery, he spent months at G.F. Strong Rehabilitation Centre before continuing physiotherapy after he returned to his home, which had been adapted for his return.

He returned to work, at first driven by family members, for reduced hours at St. Paul’s ear, nose and throat clinic in an advocacy role, using a wheelchair to get around.

Through countless hours of physiotherapy, he eventually was able to walk and increase his hours at work to half-time, wrote Dr. Brian Westerberg, a colleague, in a letter supporting Bryce’s nomination.

“It was during these early months after his return that Dr. Bryce’s remarkable strength of character became evident to us all,” he wrote.

Bryce helped launch the early hearing program in B.C. that ensures that every baby’s hearing be screened at birth and another program designed to prevent the epidemic of noise-induced hearing loss, Westerberg said.

Colleagues were “awed” by his serving as a role model and inspiration to younger and older doctors, Westerberg said.

Bryce also became a board member for the Western Institute for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, where he worked “endless hours” to help the hard of hearing to improve their communication and access to society, said the institute’s executive director, Susan Masters, in her letter supporting his nomination.

Despite left-side paralysis and loss of vision in his left eye, Bryce continued work he had begun before his stroke, chairing the fundraising committee for the B.C. Family Hearing Resource Society, became involved in the Balance and Dizziness Society and joined the University of B.C.’s Faculty of Medicine teaching ethics and the community. He is also on the board of directors for the Greater Vancouver Community Services Society.

His recovery hasn’t been without problems: In 2003, he broke his femur attempting to ski with the handicapped ski association. A year ago he was hit by a car crossing at a crosswalk and thrown from his chair, breaking his ankle.

But in a few months, he was soon back up to recording 4,000 steps a day on his pedometer.

He plays tennis in an adapted chair and gets around by himself using transit in one of his six wheelchairs.

“I used to collect boats, now I collect wheelchairs,” he said.

Bryce is content and accepting of his role, although doesn’t go so far as to say he’s grateful for his stroke.

“There’s no question there has been a spiritual and values-based quest that has been an important part of my recovery,” he said.

“But I object to the concept that this has improved my life,” he said, as some people who face and overcome adversity say they welcome the adversity for what it gave to them.

“I really appreciated life before,” he said. “I don’t honestly believe I needed a stroke to become a better person.”

But he said his life’s focus has changed.

“Early in my life, at the end of Plan A, I was fairly accomplished and focused on school, professional training and belonging to the whole medical profession and trying to do well,” he said. “I’m less focused on personal achievement and more on the appreciation of life. I appreciate and feel best about life when I can help others.”

He said he also appreciates the flexibility he has to pursue what he chooses to be involved with.

He also realizes that he is more fortunate than most in that he has the financial freedom, thanks to adequate insurance and the support of his wife.

He says his story is proof that adversity can strike anyone.

He’s honoured by the Courage to Come Back Award, one that he was aware of and supported before his stroke.

“I valued the fact that the foundation recognizes people for their struggle for overcoming adversity,” he said.

And he’s grateful for the support of his wife and girls, whose lives changed just as much as his did.

“We’d been married for 18 years when I had the stroke and it was a huge burden for my wife,” he said. “Our life was so radically different in every way and she’s overcome that burden so incredibly well.

“My family is the biggest part of Plan B,” he said.

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Since 1999, Coast Mental Health has been acknowledging everyday heroes with Courage to Come Back Awards. They are for British Columbians who overcome giant obstacles in their lives, then extend a helping hand to others. They are our friends, neighbours and co-workers who offer hope and inspiration through their own challenges. All recipients are honoured at a gala reception on May 12. Today’s profile, the last of six to run every Monday, is on the recipient in the medical category.

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