

## Maximizing Quality of Life After Stroke

My patients, clients, their loved ones, and caregivers have always provided me with the greatest inspirations. Betty is one of those very special people. Reflecting on the thought that people come into our lives for a reason, season, or a lifetime, I knew Betty will be all of those for me. I would like to share her story so that others who are facing challenges might take away from this hope and an understanding of how they might create a meaningful life even with major challenges.

In 1977 Betty had a stroke. Her husband had passed away several years before and she was only 48 years old at the time. Her children were raised and she was living on her own. I first met her when I became her therapist at the home of her brother when she was discharged from rehab. Initially the family was told it was unlikely she would talk or walk again. Her speech was significantly impaired and she was paralyzed on her right side. When she was able to walk better with the use of her quad cane and she became an outpatient at a local hospital where I had recently started working.

There are several stories that come to mind and one I recall vividly was the Thanksgiving she presented me with a handmade card on bright orange paper that she created with the help of her family. I kept it for many years despite many rounds of cleaning things out of my office. I just could not part with it. She was a bright light and thinking of her always made me smile.

Betty was always willing to work and although she got frustrated she never gave up. Some of the little things she did always amazed me and here is a special memory. Betty decided to make me a birthday cake and not the box mix variety. She made it from scratch and it was sheet cake size. In order to get it out of the oven, she had to put towels on her lap. When she arrived at the outpatient department of the hospital with my cake, not only was it big but it was frosted AND had roses on it! When I asked her who did that, she proudly told me that she did. Now I have baked many cakes but never decorated one and could never imagine adding such an elaborate finishing touch. Here is how amazingly persevering she could be. She took a Fisher Price radio of the 1970's era, put silly putty on the knob, inserted the rose pedestal, and wound up the knob. While it was turning, she used the decorator bag in her left hand to create these beautiful roses on top of the cake. WOW!!

It was that positive spirit that made it obvious to me that she would be one of the 3 patients I would feature on the series of videotapes I was creating for patients to be able to proactive repeating words, phrases, and sentences. She came dressed up and smiling as always. Later her daughter shared that she felt like a movie star. For sure, she was a star in so many ways. Her interview included some of these thoughts as she answered some of these questions, occasionally

hesitating for a word but now able to express herself quite well.

- I was paralyzed and they did not think I would walk or talk again.
- All I could say was four – four – four but I thought I was talking.
- In speech therapy I worked an hour a day practicing. I had trouble with the longer words. I talked too fast and had to slow down but that was hard for me. I was afraid I was going to forget my words.
- Occupational therapy helped me to cook – I love cooking but forgot my recipes.
- I had physical therapy and had to wear a brace.
- Limitations – I get tired but am very independent and live by myself.... but I can usually do anything.

This was in 1985 and through the years I would try to visit her or occasionally call. Whenever I had a patient in her apartment building, I made sure to stop by and see what she was up to. She would share with me stories of all the afghans she had made. Now picture this. She was right handed and cannot use that hand so she learned to crochet with her non-dominant hand and yes, that meant she did it one handed. She loved to cook and told me stories of all the pumpkin breads she would make. I know in the earlier years she would take her wheelchair and put it in the car then drive herself to the store and do her shopping. Her speech was not perfect but she did an excellent job of communicating and always wanted an update on what was going on in my life.

In the summer of 2006 I had a speech evaluation in her apartment building and was glad to see her name still listed. It had been awhile and she had been on my mind. When I called it was not Betty but a caregiver that answered. I wondered what was happening in her life at this point and I was eager to touch base. Betty was sitting at the table eating a meal prepared by the caregiver and just as bright, cheery, and talkative as ever. There was a woman visiting at the time and I was sharing with her how much of an inspiration Betty had been to me. She chimed in and agreed with me then shared with me just another example of how amazing Betty was. There were quilting squares on the table and I commented on them because I have done some quilting. She said Betty wanted to learn how to quilt. Now remember she cannot use her right hand. I smiled and knew with the help of this wonderful friend and her determination it would happen somehow.

In the spring of 2007 I was saddened to read the paper and see that Betty had passed away a few days before. I was headed out of town but I was trying to figure out how I could stop by for a few minutes for the calling hours. I literally had 15 minutes between appointments but I was able to make it happen.

I sought out one of her children so that I could express to the family my tremendous admiration for a grand lady and a role model for those whose lives have been dramatically changed at a young age. Interestingly, her daughter told

me what I had done for her mom. I never even gave that a thought through all those years. When Betty came to mind, I thought about the gift she was to me. I would share her story to inspire others and to stay mindful of ways to help others create meaning in the midst of adversity. What happened next was the perfect ending to a beautiful story.

Her daughter told me Betty took up quilting and I shared the fact that I just “happened” to drop in the day this was being discussed. And I am a quilter as well. I truly believe there are no coincidences! After that visit, she began working on the quilt and when Betty started to have some new health concerns she told her daughter she would have to finish the quilt for her if she was not able to do it herself. Her daughter’s comment was – “Mom, you have to finish it. I have two hands and one of them will get in the way.” Displayed at the funeral home was a finished quilt except for the backing – a tribute to a woman who was a gift to all those people who were blessed to have known her. Betty’s spirit will be kept alive by those who were touched by her life and I feel privileged to be one of the many fortunate ones.

*Happiness is not a matter of events;  
it depends on the tides of the mind.*  
ALICE MEYNELL