

TEAM Wendy

A Katy stroke survivor shares her story of recovery, with medical tips from area physicians

Written by Julie Estep

Photography by Jason Lehecka



Stroke survivor Wendy Thomson (pictured, center) surrounded by her friends and family, Tiffany Cash, dad Bing Bortle, mom Lois Bortle, and daughter Heidi

Wendy Thomson was sitting in her living room watching late-night TV, thinking about how she needed to pack for her upcoming vacation to Costa Rica, when she suddenly began to feel dizzy and nauseated. Breathing became difficult for Thomson as her family rushed in after hearing her calls, and she could barely hear their quick conversation about how it looked like food poisoning. An emergency trip to the hospital revealed she had suffered a life-threatening stroke in her brain stem.

Taking Quick Action

Because of her family's immediate action dialing 911, Thomson received the critical medical attention she needed. "I encourage people, if it's even possible they had a stroke, to get attention," says Thomson's husband, Kip. "It's better to be wrong and waste time in the hospital, than to have had a stroke and have to deal with the damage later." Dr. Jose Diaz, a Katy neurologist affiliated with Memorial Hermann Katy

talk again. "Now, you can't shut me up," she says with a grin. "Stroke recovery is a process, and it takes time," says Dr. Danique VanDongen, the medical director at Memorial Hermann Rehabilitation Hospital in Katy. Most improvement is made within the first six months after the stroke occurs.

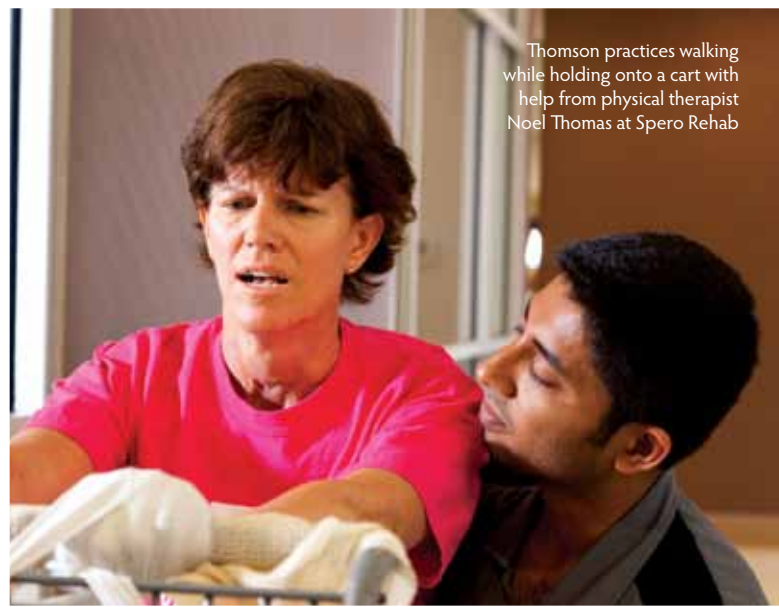
Support from Others

Throughout her struggle to recover, Thomson's support system has been wonderful, with friends and family holding up alphabet cards in the early days to help her communicate. Dozens of volunteers from Grace Fellowship Church came to the Thomson's residence to convert the home into a more wheelchair-accessible environment. "Take help from people who offer, because it's a long-term fight," shares Thomson.

When the Methodist Hospital System hosted their annual Stride4Stroke fundraising event, Thomson's friend Debbie



Thomson works on fine motor control skills during a therapy session at Spero Rehab in Katy



Thomson practices walking while holding onto a cart with help from physical therapist Noel Thomas at Spero Rehab

Hospital and Methodist West Houston Hospital, notes three important questions to ask if you think you're suffering a stroke. "Can you lift your arms?" he says. "Can you smile? Can you talk?"

Road to Recovery

Fortunately for Thomson and her family, her recovery since her December 2011 stroke has seemed to supersede doctors' expectations. Because of her husband's quick thinking in calling an ambulance, she was able to receive a medicine called tissue plasminogen activator (tPA), nicknamed "the clot buster."

Despite severe damage to her brain stem, Thomson had use of her right hand and could walk by holding onto something in front of her by April, after months of physical therapy at Spero Rehab in Katy. Doctors didn't know if she'd be able to

Henderson started a team and had shirts made in her friend's favorite color. Friends of the family showed up from all over, with more than 160 people wearing hot pink "Team Wendy" shirts. "It's a representation of the amazing support that they've had," says Henderson.

Dr. VanDongen adds that friends and family play a crucial role in recovery. "Social interaction and connecting with others often helps to ease feelings associated with isolation



Stroke Risk Factors

- Elevated stress levels
- Age
- Diabetes
- Family history of stroke
- Heart disease
- High cholesterol
- Hypertension
- Sleep apnea
- Smoking

and depression that are common after a stroke," she says. "A positive attitude goes a long way."

Raising Awareness

The biggest mistake that people make about strokes is ignoring their symptoms. They go to bed and hope that everything will be better in the morning. "But time equals brain," explains Dr. Diaz. "We need to get the message out there that strokes should be treated with as much urgency as heart attacks." KM

JULIE ESTEP was born and raised in Katy and enjoys sharing inspirational stories from her hometown.

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Stroke Warning Signs

Unlike with a heart attack, symptoms of a stroke usually occur all at once and can include:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm, or leg, especially on one side of the body.
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking, or difficulty understanding.
- Sudden difficulty seeing, in one or both eyes.
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, or loss of balance or coordination.
- Sudden, severe headache with no known cause.

If you experience any of the warning signs above, seek immediate medical attention.



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