



Real Stories

Eugene Smith has overcome a number of challenges in his life – polio at 12, 2 confirmed TIA's during his 30 years of military service and “the big one” (as he put it), a major stroke at the age of 70, not long after retiring after 10 years as a bus driver for the Sacramento Regional Transit Authority.

When “the big one” hit him, he hit the shower door and the floor. That’s when his world as he knew it changed forever. His wife, fortunately, knew that he must have suffered a stroke. Eugene knew too, but couldn’t say a word. He could still see, but he could not talk.

That day, in 2003, began a one month journey through acute care and rehabilitation hospitals. At first, he could quite figure out where he was. He knew his loved ones and tried to ask them questions. But, as often happens with stroke, his brain knew what he wanted to say but his speech center didn’t cooperate. He had aphasia.

While he made progress physically, his aphasia remained. Now he might call that a blessing in disguise. Why? Upon his return home he began speech therapy – and that’s where he met Ted. Ted, also a stroke victor, also with aphasia, also in intense speech therapy, also needing a friend.

Eugene, nor Ted, had ever played golf when the Saving Strokes flyer was distributed at their speech therapy group session. First, Ted talked Eugene into attending a stroke support group with him – where the Saving Strokes flyer surfaced yet again. That’s when the “I’ll go if you go” conversation began. And it was that prodding that brought them both to Saving Strokes in 2003. And it was the 2003 Saving Strokes event that kicked off a devotion to golf and the community on a whole new level.

Fast forward to today. Eugene (and Ted) have their speech back – totally one would say as they race to see who can get in the last word. Eugene plays golf 2 days each week with various members of a close knit group of 6 stroke victors, all of whom met through the Saving Strokes program. Each of those days, in addition to a couple more, he also heads out to either William Land Park or Haggin Oaks to assist with youth golf or a disabled golf program. Eugene is a stroke victor.....but now also a hero to his peers and to the many, many children and disabled of all ages he has mentored in the game he never even watched on TV before his truly life-changing event.



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Carl Valdrow is also one of the golf group, one who hated the game of golf when a stroke changed his outlook on life.

Carl was in law enforcement for 30 years. During that time, he suffered a massive heart attack. He notes that as the first major life-changing event of his life. He was, however, able to return to work as a police officer. He also became an avid bike rider, a well chosen activity given that he retired from law enforcement in the bike-friendly town of Davis.

It was in 2001, while out in his yard, that he felt as though someone had suddenly hammered a spike into his head. This “worst headache of my life” led him to go inside to lie down. Fifteen minutes later he was numb on his left side. His wife, luckily, called 9-1-1, which got him to the hospital within minutes. He suffered a second stroke the second week he was in the hospital, leaving him completely paralyzed on his left side. This is the moment he identifies as his second life-changing event.

“I would concentrate on moving my left toe” said Carl. “When I finally got it to move, I’d stare at my ankle until I could get it to move.” “And the funniest thing, because you have to laugh, when I’d yawn my left arm would go up. At first, I couldn’t raise my arm unless I yawned.” But that encouraged him to keep his focus. Once his got his ankle to move, he concentrated on his elbow. After his elbow, his leg and then his arm. He doesn’t remember why he chose that progression, but it worked.

Once he was discharged from the hospital he exercised at home and, at the encouragement of his wife, joined a stroke support group. Has luck would have it, the same as that attended by Eugene and Ted. When the Saving Strokes flyer was circulated, he passed it by. He hated golf. His wife, Susie, picked the flyer up. “Carl, I know you don’t like it, but let’s try.”

He couldn’t hit the ball at all when he attended his first Saving Strokes event. But, soon after, his wife bought him a cheap set of clubs – the same set he uses today when he plays 2 time each week as a member of the group of six stroke victors that are now best friends. Given his initial dislike for the game, his golf opportunities have expanded far beyond his expectations. Susie’s travels have given him an opportunity to play at Myrtle Beach and other enviable locations around the country.



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When not traveling, Carl also mentors in the disabled and youth golf programs in Sacramento.

John Castiglia was a USDA inspector for 23 years. Tiring of that occupation, but not ready for retirement, he got his degree and subsequently taught elementary school for 11 years, worked as a vice-principal for 5 years and retired after serving as a junior high counselor for 15 years.

John had been a scratch golfer since childhood and was a high school golf coach during his teaching years. Having retired at 60, he was looking forward to many leisurely golf games, until health issues got in the way. At the age of 69 he won a battle with pancreatic cancer, which left him a diabetic. The next year he had 6-way coronary bypass surgery. The year after that he was told that his left carotid artery (which is one of the two highways for getting maintaining blood circulation to your brain) was 90% closed, so had a procedure to clear the artery of plaque.

Three months later, he had the worst headache of his life. His stroke was of the less common hemorrhagic type, also know as a bleeding stroke. He was left paralyzed on his left side, with no left-sided vision. He spent all of January 2003 either as an inpatient or in outpatient rehabilitation. It was during this time that he saw the flyer for Saving Strokes. As John said “that flyer gave me a reason to keep going to rehab.” And that flyer led him to the 2003 Saving Strokes event, where he met Eugene and Ted and Carl and a whole host of other people just like him who were excited to either bring golf back into their lives or learn the game for the first time. (Though he has regained some use of his left side and his vision, John still golfs with the use of an adaptive cart.) And, of course, it brought him to the “group of 6” who play every week, talk to each other every week, encourage each other every week and keep each other’s spirits and outlook on life at the highest level. And, of course, the coach in John has led him to participate as a mentor in the youth and disabled golf programs.

I asked them all, if asked, what they would say to others. I quote:
“ We are so lucky. It could have been so much worse.”
“You can’t quit, you have to keep movin’”
“Never give up and try something new.”

When asked what Saving Strokes meant to them:
“Friendship”



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“Camaraderie”

“I made best friends I would never have had who encourage me every day.”

“Stroke survivors have trouble with memory you know, so we make sure everyone counts their golf strokes correctly, especially if it helps the rest of us.”

“We help each other concentrate on holding the club straight, we help each other all the time.:

“Every week, when I look forward to golfing with my friends, I’m excited because I know I have something to do!”