Stroke Survivor Shows Others 'What You Can Do If You Work At It'

by Jack Williams

Amid his rigorous rehabilitation, there's one battle that Bill Torres can't seem to win: convincing stroke survivors that he's one of them.

At first glance, they figure he's a nimble-tongued phony. A good storyteller, maybe, but was he ever helpless and speechless? How could he know what it's like to be half the man he used to be, with one side of his body virtually disconnected from his brain?

"I have to bring along my physical therapist to tell them I had a major stroke," he said. "Otherwise, they won't believe me."

Three years ago, at 68, Torres lost everything, it seemed, but his life.

BATTLING BACK - Bill Torres, 70, a stroke survivor, works with personal trainer Joy Dahlberg, whom he calls â€œAttila the Honey.â€• CNS Photo by Nancee E. Lewis. On his way to breakfast, he collapsed on a railing. The right side of his face caved in, contorted by partial paralysis. "I couldn't move anything," he said. Torres, who had been taking care of his 86-year-old mother, needed her to take care of him. With his right side immobilized by the stroke, he was a one-handed man unable to dress himself.

"It took me eight months to move a finger and 12 months to shake someone's hand," he said. "I had to relearn how to tie my shoes."

Progress has been agonizingly, almost imperceptibly, slow. Each body part had a mind of its own, turning routine movements into monumental struggles. But he has gone from immobile to independent, discarding a wheelchair and then a cane. Naturally right-handed, Torres learned to drive with his left hand and left foot until his right side began responding to therapy.

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"Now I'm the poster boy for stroke survivors at Sharp and VA hospitals for showing what you can do if you work at it," said Torres, who had retired from a career in sales.

For Torres, a longtime paddleball and racquetball player who prided himself on his fitness, including a resting pulse under 40 beats per minute, it wasn't enough to be functional. After about 1 1/2 years of physical and occupational therapy, he enlisted a personal trainer to take him to a new level.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, he works out for an hour under the supervision of Joy Dahlberg, 24. "I call her Attila the Honey," he said. "She just tortures me."

The rest of the week, he works out on his own at a health club.

Until a recent move, Torres hadn't missed two days in a row of workouts in more than a year. Yet his brain-to-body connection is still so tenuous that his right hand reacts to loud noises by shooting erratically into the air.

ABS SALUTETorres, nearly 71, is seeing that proverbial six-pack for the first time in his life, thanks to a dedicated regimen of abdominal exercises. He does up to 500 repetitions most days, including crunches and leg lifts.

TAKING SIDESOn the two days he works with Dahlberg, he'll stress balance, coordination and range of motion. "Sometimes we'll just focus on his right side, which is weaker and with less feeling than his left," Dahlberg said. "We want to get to the point where he has full function in his extremities." Torres warms up on a recumbent bike for about 20 minutes. He also walks six or seven blocks daily, concentrating on pushing off on his toes on his balky right side. "My right side can't keep up with my left," he said.

DOWNSIZINGTorres dropped 17 pounds and lost 3 inches around his waist on a low-carbohydrate Body by Jake diet that he stuck to for 12 weeks. It required him to eat six small meals and drink 12 to 15 glasses of water a day, a big departure from his normal regimen.

"I gotta have a martini once in a while," he said.

Now, at 5 feet 9 inches and 178 pounds, he's back to one or two modest meals a day and a morning protein drink with powdered calcium. "I love spaghetti and meatballs, but I'll just get a half-order," he said.

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