



## Angela Wright: Breaking barriers for young stroke survivors



When Angela Wright was a child, her grandmother had a stroke she never recovered from. “And that’s the only experience I’d had with stroke,” recalls Angela, who lives in Vancouver. Until, at age 38, she was on a fishing trip with a client and woke up feeling terrible — she thought it was a hangover.

Instead, she was rushed to hospital with a hemorrhagic stroke, which is a when a blood vessel in the head ruptures and bleeds into the brain. She was in the hospital for four months, the first six weeks in the intensive care unit.

“I kept saying to my nurse, ‘There’s no way I had a stroke,’” recalls Angela, who used to run marathons and work long hours in investment management before her stroke in 2011. Now, hospital staff were telling her parents she’d never walk or have a normal life.

Angela’s struggles continued after her discharge. “Once I got home, what I found was the system is not set up for someone who is in their 30s.” For instance, while her speech and mobility improved, Angela found it difficult to write — although she could type and knew how to write — but her therapists shrugged. They had treatment plans tailored to senior clients. “I was a single woman with a mortgage to pay. They didn’t seem to know how to help me get back to being me.”

As well, her doctor told her the stroke was “cryptogenic,” or happened for no known reason, and it would never happen again. However, her own research revealed that her aura migraines, which cause visual disturbances instead of pain, may have put her at risk, and she could have a second stroke.

In 2013, she contacted the Stroke Recovery Association of B.C. The executive director agreed young stroke survivors needed more support. “I can’t help you, but you can help me,” he said, and invited Angela to join the board, and she has fulfilled three 3-year terms as a board member.

In 2016, through that organization — but on her own and with no budget — she started the Young Stroke Survivors support group. She wanted to give survivors like her “somewhere they felt seen and heard.” Angela didn’t set an age limit, so anyone could join, and focused on education, not just emotional support, by bringing in speakers. By 2019, the March of Dimes offered to take it over and make it a national program.

Since 2015, Angela has been working with government-run Stroke Services B.C. as the “voice of the patient” and she currently sits on the BC Executive Stroke Steering Committee. That led to her becoming involved in research projects and then a province-wide health steering committee.

She found her words and experiences had impact. Once, during a meeting, she told what she thought was a funny story about how her mother was afraid to go to the bathroom in the hospital, as her daughter kept being taken away for tests and procedures without warning or explanation. That story caused one member at the table to make a policy change at her hospital that no patient would be removed from their room without informing family.

Angela has also made multiple media appearances on behalf of Heart & Stroke and other organizations, and as a result gets tearful calls from survivors and family members. “If I had not been there as a resource, I don’t know if they’d have been able to get help,” she says of the challenges of navigating the healthcare system.

While Angela has devoted considerable time over the last decade-plus to volunteer work, she’s also had to invest in rebuilding her career. After her stroke, she found her employer unreceptive to her agreed upon plan to return to work.. “There was the impression out there that I was broken.”

Although Angela completed five high-level business certificates at Cornell University right after her stroke to prove her industry wrong, but it wasn’t enough. She moved on from that job and has had held a series of positions, many of them ending in frustration. In 2019 she pivoted away from the industry she knew and started her own business as a Luxury Travel Advisor. She also recently started a contract position back in investment management at an organization that’s much more supportive.

Her volunteer work as a patient advocate, while challenging at times, has been rewarding for Angela. “I’ve seen a change in healthcare groups, and in people who are on the front lines. They are willing to change how they do things,” she says. That and the very real needs of young stroke patients helps keep her going.

“I can’t do anything to press rewind and change my story. But if I can do anything to make someone’s else’s experience just a bit easier, I want to do that.”