

Holy Family Plays a Role in Young Man's Stroke Recovery



A question mark-shaped scar on 35-year-old Dan Heffley's head curves around his left ear. The question mark is an appropriate symbol for Dan. After a stroke and brain surgery in 2003, doctors questioned whether he could live. Now, four years later — with help from family, Holy Family's Institute for Learning Abilities,[®] and community — the thing most people wonder about is the source of the strength that inspires Dan to continue working, for hours each day, to reclaim himself.

No one knows exactly what caused Dan's stroke. The best guess is that he tore his carotid artery while lifting weights. A blood clot resulting from the tear worked its way into the left side of Dan's brain. On June 25, 2003, the clot literally brought him down, leaving him unconscious and half paralyzed. A decompressive craniectomy, or surgical "strokectomy," relieved pressure in Dan's brain and saved his life, leaving only the right half of his brain.

Without the left hemisphere, experts believed that Dan would never be able to comprehend language, recognize his family, or even have a sense of self.

What an ironic fate for a young man in the peak of condition after four years in the Special Operations Forces, U.S. Army Rangers. What a tragedy for his wife, Kim, and 3-year-old daughter, Ryann. Dan and Kim had just purchased a house and were expecting the birth of their second child.

Clinically, Dan is an anomaly. He is right-handed, which means the brain areas devoted to speech and cognition are on the left. Dan lost the left side of his brain

to the stroke, which means he should not be able to speak or think. The fact that his speech and cognition faculties are developing in the right side of Dan's brain may mean that he has always been latently left-handed or ambidextrous. To explain Dan's unaccountable progress, the Heffley family does not rule out old-fashioned divine intervention and hard work. Dan is a fighter from a family of fighters who appreciate the power of prayer and love.

Jim Heffley remembers the horrible days after Dan's stroke. "First, I made a rule. Whenever Dan looked up, I wanted him to see the face of someone who loved him. Love is a powerful tool." A family member — Jim; his wife, Dottie; or one of Dan's brothers, Jim, Mike, Sean, or Patrick — sat with Dan around the clock. Dan was supposedly in a coma.

His father came to doubt the coma diagnosis. "When I held Dan's hand," Jim recalls, "Dan gripped back. The doctors said it was just spontaneous movement, but I was sure he was communicating with me." As an experiment, Jim inflated a latex glove and put it in Dan's left hand. Dan dropped it onto the floor. Jim gave it back to Dan. Dan threw it across the bed. "He did that nine times," Jim remembers. "He was playing catch, and he was saying 'Hey, I'm here!'"

Doctors eventually sent Dan to a rehab hospital. Therapists worked with him daily, to help him relearn elementary skills.

Staff at Avonworth School District, the district Dan had attended, followed Dan's progress. Through teacher Kathy Elder, a close family friend, Jim Heffley learned that Holy Family's Institute for Learning Abilities (ILA), a short distance from Jim's home, was using a therapy developed for stroke survivors to help children overcome learning problems. Jim followed up.

In June 2004, Dan started working with Scott Flurry, ILA's director of outpatient services. Mr. Flurry had never worked with a stroke survivor, and most of his clients had been children. Nonetheless, Dan's

tenacity was reason enough for Mr. Flurry to adapt the therapy for Dan, who could not write and could speak only a few words. Dan's humor kept Mr. Flurry on his toes.

"One day I wrote something on the chalkboard and then turned my back," Mr. Flurry remembers. "Dan erased it. I rewrote that line three times before I caught on. That kind of thing kept reminding me: Dan is really here."



Strengthened by the cognitive retraining exercises that Dan does during his ILA sessions, Dan's vocabulary has grown and he can write with his left hand. In one of his therapeutic activities, he works with shapes within a complex polygon called a tanagram. This strengthens the neural pathways so the brain can process information more efficiently.

Dan has also been working with speech therapists at Duquesne University. "Dan's progress is month to month," reports his dad, "and sometimes, year to year. But he does continue to improve."

In addition to family and therapeutic support, Dan receives support of a group called Friends of Dan Heffley. The group has helped Dan and Kim pay for health insurance. An annual fundraiser, a golf event, usually occurs in early September. For information call 412-647-4896.

Dan will continue with his therapies and continue helping his brothers with construction and home improvement projects. "He has handicaps," reports his father, "but he is a success story. There is no question about that."