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LOCAL EDUCATOR HAS A STROKE OF LUCK

WEST POINT, Miss.—As assistant principal of Central School in West Point, Jacqueline Gray's job is to inspire children. This past year has provided more opportunity than usual to do so.

On the first day of Christmas holidays in 2008, Gray had a dentist appointment in Columbus. "While I was in the waiting room, I started getting nauseated. It was about 10:20 a.m. and I realized that I had not eaten any breakfast that morning," she says. "I decided I would step out and get something to eat. But then I had a feeling that I should go ask for help instead."

Gray asked the receptionist to call 9-1-1. "They took me back to an exam room and helped me get into the chair. Within a minute of asking for help, I couldn't move anything on my right side and the right side of my mouth was numb," she says. "The dentist asked me what was wrong and I told him 'I think I'm having a stroke.'" She was rushed by ambulance to the nearby hospital, where she recovered for 10 days.

An Unlikely Risk

At age 42 and seemingly the picture of health, Gray was quite an unlikely candidate. "I had my yearly checkup and blood work done the month before this, and everything was fine," she says. "You never think it can happen to you."

Upon discharge from that hospital, Gray was transferred to North Mississippi Medical Center's Rehabilitation Institute in Tupelo, a CARF-certified stroke rehabilitation center that specializes in rehabilitation for stroke, neurological and trauma patients. Led by medical director Brian Condit, M.D., the Rehabilitation Institute team includes nurses, physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists and a recreation therapist.

At the Rehabilitation Institute, therapists helped Gray regain her speech, ability to walk and to care for herself. She graduated from a wheelchair to a walker to a cane as she became more steady on her feet. Therapists used advanced rehabilitation technologies such as Bioness functional electrostimulation to re-educate muscles.

“Mrs. Gray has worked very hard to get back to her normal life,” Dr. Condit said. “She is a tremendous individual who loves her work and the children at her school.”

A Hidden Threat

During her rehabilitation therapy, Gray underwent further evaluation of her stroke by NMMC neurologist Mark Fletcher, M.D. He determined that a cardiac condition—patent foramen ovale—likely caused Gray’s stroke, and he referred her to Barry Bertolet, M.D., a cardiologist on the NMMC Heart Institute’s medical staff.

A patent foramen ovale is a common heart disorder that often goes unnoticed from birth. “The heart is divided into four separate chambers. The upper chambers, or atria, are divided by a wall called the atrial septum,” Dr. Bertolet explains. “A patent foramen ovale or PFO is a hole in this atrial septum caused by incomplete growth of that wall before birth. With the PFO, blood flows abnormally through this hole and once the patient has had one event, another is likely to follow.”

These subsequent events include not only strokes but also heart attacks, pulmonary hypertension (high blood pressure in the lungs), congestive heart failure (weakening of the heart muscle) and abnormal heart rhythms.

Gray never shied away from the daunting tasks the rehab staff gave her. “I stayed in the rehab gym as long as they would let me every day,” she says. “I don't mind hard work. I just want the results.”

Once she was stronger, Dr. Bertolet recommended closing the hole in her heart with a minimally invasive procedure where the cardiologist inserts a catheter through the femoral artery in the patient’s leg and uses a device known as the Amplatzer® to close the PFO. “The Amplatzer is a small metal disk that works almost like a button to hold the hole shut,” Dr. Bertolet says. “It closes the hole immediately, and the person’s own tissue grows over it eventually.” After one more night at NMMC, she was discharged home.

A Strong Support System

Although she never lost the ability to speak, her mouth still feels numb. “I have taught children to read, so I know how to over-enunciate words,” she says. “Especially when I’m tired, I have to remind myself to over-enunciate so that I don’t slur my speech.”

With the support of Principal Reita Humphries and the Central School faculty and staff, she returned to work part time that April and full time that July. Following six months of outpatient therapy, Gray continues to do the home exercises her therapists

recommended and has walked without a cane since July 2009. “I have faith that it’s all coming back,” she says. “It just takes time.”

She was fortunate to have family support, which included Will Jr.—her high school sweetheart and husband of 24 years—along with their children, Will III and Marquita. Through it all, her fifth- and sixth-graders have kept her motivated. “They sent handmade cards after the stroke, and when I returned to school, I got hugs and kisses forever,” she says. “They are really a blessing to me.”

Gray’s students are also learning a big lesson from watching her. “We teach children never to give up, even when you are hit by something in life that’s not so easy. We tell them they can persevere and it will get better,” she says. “They see that I’ve overcome and I’m continuing to improve, and it’s living out what we say. I think it inspires them.”

To Learn More

North Mississippi Medical Center offers inpatient, outpatient and home health rehabilitation services at several locations throughout north Mississippi and northwest Alabama. For more information, call 1-800-THE DESK (1-800-843-3375) or visit www.nmhs.net.