

Fish Culturist BJ Woodworth Works Hard to Overcome Stroke

ROME (May 20, 2004) -- Forty-year old William John "BJ" Woodworth isn't afraid of public speaking. Before July 19th, 2003, he often gave presentations to colleges, career fairs and even at the New York State Fair about his work as a fish culturist for New York's trout and salmon fish hatchery north of Rome. But now, he just wants to make sure the words come out the right way.

On July 19th, a motorcycle accident left him in a coma for three weeks. He suffered a stroke that paralyzed his right side. He was unable to eat, speak or write. He also sustained numerous physical injuries.

"You never think it's going to happen to you," said Woodworth. "One day you wake up and it's different." Right after the accident, Woodworth was rushed to Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester where he lay in ICU for several weeks and eventually went through physical rehabilitation.

"I want it all back," said Woodworth, referring to his desire to speak and communicate effectively. And he definitely lets you know that he's willing to work hard to make it happen. He began speech therapy in October 2003 at Rome Memorial Hospital's Speech Therapy Department.

In clinical terms, Woodworth sustained both aphasia and apraxia as a result of the stroke, said Rome Memorial Hospital's Director of Speech-Language Pathology Jackie Kolb, M.A., CCC-SLP. Aphasia is the decreased ability to understand others or express oneself. It is also the decreased ability to interpret and use language for communication. Apraxia is the decreased ability or inability to position the lips, the tongue or vocal cords to produce various sounds for speech resulting not from weakness but rather from the impaired motoric aspect of producing sounds due to a stroke or other neurological injury.

"BJ's cognition – recall, problem solving and reasoning – were not affected by the stroke, just his language skills," said Kolb. In addition, written grammar was an issue. "BJ worked a lot on writing – his writing has improved a great deal, as has his verbal skills." Woodworth started out practicing small words and reading aloud and is now practicing words that are much more difficult, said Kolb.

"It's been frustrating not being able to say the words I want," said Woodworth. "I can see them, but I can't get them out," he added.

One of BJ's saving graces is his sense of humor," said Kolb. "He is one of the hardest working patients I've ever seen." Indeed, Woodworth is determined to win the fight. "It's getting better every day," he said, adding that the fun part of therapy is "having somebody that's pushing me and knowing that it's getting better."

"BJ has age on his side, but he also had a severe stroke," said Kolb. "Research shows that the greatest recovery after a stroke like this is by using the brain and doing therapy. The more that people use their brain, the more the circuiting builds around the damaged areas." Being motivated, working hard through the struggles and getting back at activities has made Woodworth's recovery "all the faster," said Kolb.

Last Thanksgiving, Woodworth began working at the fish hatchery again. He recently gave his first tour. "At first, I was nervous and after awhile, it got easier," he said. "BJ has a lot of work years left," said Kolb. "We want to try to maximize his recovery here."

Woodworth's story is a celebration of Better Speech and Hearing Month which is during the month of May as designated by the American Speech-Hearing-Language Association. Rome Memorial Hospital's Speech Therapy Department offers evaluation and treatment for dysfunction or changes in communication, voice, cognition, or swallowing by physician order. For more information, please call 338-7154.

PHOTO CAPTION: BJ Woodworth, left, and Rome Memorial Hospital's Director of Speech-Language Pathology Jackie Kolb, M.A., CCC-SLP, meet for speech therapy twice a week. Woodworth was in a motorcycle accident which resulted in a stroke.