

High-flying young doc overcomes stroke that once grounded him

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After surviving a stroke at age 30, Dave Levy went through physical, occupational and speech therapy. Photo courtesy: Allison Pataki

Flying at 35,000 feet at the start of a trip from their Chicago home to Hawaii to celebrate the upcoming birth of their first child, Dave Levy woke his sleeping wife and said, "Does my right eye look weird?"

Allison Pataki, five months pregnant, replied that his eye was indeed dilated. As an orthopedic resident, Dave realized what to do.

"I knew from my medical training that I should look out of the window, look at the light, and my pupil should constrict," he said. "So I did that and nothing changed. That meant it was fixed and dilated. I knew that often precedes death."

When he turned back to his wife, she had a question for him.

"Are you having a stroke?" she said.

"I think I might be," Dave said.

A nurse on the flight hurried to Dave's side. He soon lost consciousness and Allison faced the prospect of raising their unborn child without him.

"Why would this young, healthy, strong, 30-year-old doctor be having a stroke?" she thought. "I'm in a state of shock and around me people are turning to me and saying you need to stay calm, you have a baby inside you. But I was thinking, I don't know how I can stay calm right now."

Pilots made an emergency landing in Fargo, North Dakota, where doctors spent hours trying to determine exactly what was wrong with Dave. They asked Allison—a *New York Times* bestselling author—if he had been experiencing back pain, if he drank or smoked. None applied to her husband.

"You're just terrified, you're sad, you're lonely, you're scared," Allison

said. "Part of you is in such disbelief that you're hopeful, you're in this fog of magical thinking that maybe he just has [low blood sugar](#) and he'll be OK in the morning."

But things were not OK. Allison called both her and Dave's parents. Dave's dad, Nelson Levy, was trained in neurosurgery, so he understood the dire predicament far too well. Allison's dad is George Pataki, a former governor of New York who briefly ran for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination.

Upon hearing from Allison, both sets of parents prepared to travel to Fargo—perhaps to say their final goodbyes.

The next day, June 10, 2015, Dave woke up. But it wasn't the same Dave Levy. This version was "inanimate," Allison said. Because not only did he suffer a stroke, it was an unusual type.

Most strokes are unilateral, meaning they affect only one side of the brain. But Dave's stroke managed to affect both sides, in part because of a couple of other physical anomalies he had.

"Most people who have that kind of [stroke](#) usually die," he said.

While alive, he was hardly living. He couldn't breathe or swallow on his own and he had no memory.

Days later, he was flown back to Chicago where he became a patient in the same hospital where he had been a resident. He went through physical, occupational and speech therapy, which greatly aided his recovery. His memory began to return about three weeks later as two old friends walked with him around the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago.

Meanwhile, Allison and the rest of Dave's family and friends surrounded

him with old pictures, videos, cards, emails, letters and notes. Allison wrote letters to Dave as she sat by his bed each night. Those letters became the basis for her fifth book, "Beauty in the Broken Places," a memoir that chronicles the family's experience. The book went on sale May 1, the beginning of American Stroke Month.

"They say hope and support and morale are important," Allison said. "We wanted his thoughts to stay positive. We wanted him to feel that he was loved and supported."

Today, things have improved dramatically.

Dave and Allison's daughter, Lilly, is now 2 years old. The couple is expecting their second daughter in August. Dave and Allison, now both 33, freely share their story of hope and survival. They speak publicly about the challenges that young people with brain injuries confront. And they offer encouragement to others.

"You will, at some point, come out on the other side," Allison said. "When you know others who have been where you are and have gone through the terror ... it's important to rally the network around you."

Dave is even more direct: "Everyone can improve, and everyone can hope."

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