

# Stroke almost took gospel star's life—then taught her about living

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Rev. Stefanie Minatee, in a photo she provided, survived a stroke in 2015

Singing in church as a young girl in New Jersey, Stefanie Minatee had a

feeling that she was destined to do great things. And, indeed, her faith lifted her.

She went on to earn a Ph.D. and become an ordained minister. She guided a high school student choir to the Palace of Versailles and other grand venues around the world. She authored numerous songs and established her own audition-only Grammy Award-winning community choir, Jubilation. Through her choir, she's worked with Ray Charles, Dionne Warwick and Queen Latifah—or, "Dana," as Minatee still calls her.

"I made her sing in front of the congregation at my church, and she's been singing ever since," Minatee said.

But Minatee's fast-paced life took a toll on her health.

She ate whatever she wanted, and exercise was out of the question. Eventually, she became 100 pounds overweight. Her blood pressure soared. Even after she was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes, she didn't always take her medicine.

"I really felt that I was invincible and could do anything I wanted," Minatee said.

Four years ago, Minatee arrived home from a long day feeling exhausted and listless. She seemed so weak that a close friend called 911. Minatee didn't think it was serious and sent the paramedics away. Later, her brother stopped by and persuaded her to go to the hospital. When Minatee woke up the next morning, she couldn't feel her left side.

"I didn't think I would survive," she said.

She had suffered a massive stroke. Doctors also discovered that she'd

previously had numerous mini-strokes, or transient ischemic attacks.

In addition to her paralysis, Minatee lost the peripheral vision on her left side and the ability to swallow. She also suffered cognitive impairment. Although she worked with [physical therapists](#), she remained bedridden for the next 18 months.

Yet the woman who'd accomplished so much earlier in life wasn't about to give up. Minatee persevered in her rehabilitation, determined to reclaim some semblance of her previous life.

"She was always very focused, and she just kept going," said Dr. Yekyung Kong, a practicing [physical medicine](#) and rehabilitation doctor at Kessler Rehabilitation in West Orange, New Jersey. "Her religious belief also helped her. She knew that if she worked hard, God would help her."

Minatee has recovered most of her cognitive capabilities. She can walk and prepare her own meals.

"With this malady, there are some things I won't get back, but I want to be as independent as possible," she said. "It's a long process, but I'm getting better every day."

The process includes 90-minute workouts twice a week and no more sugary drinks or starches. Every few months, she sees Kong, who treats the stiffness in her left arm and leg—a result of her paralysis—with injections that help the muscles relax. Minatee wants to drive again one day, and Kong believes she can.

"Stefanie is a very unique lady," Kong said. "She never gives up."

Minatee now views her stroke as a blessing. It made her realize that her

life had been going by in a blur, so fast that she barely remembers some of the places she visited.

"It forced me to change," she said.

She watches her church's weekly sermon online and remains involved with Jubilation, which will celebrate its 20th anniversary in June.

"I'm not formally in the pulpit, but preaching is not always in the pulpit," Minatee said. "It's our responsibility to not just live here on this earth but to leave a legacy for those that are younger."

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