

Toy building boosts woodworker's stroke recovery

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Stroke survivor Gary Lucas, in a photo he provided.

Gary Lucas delights in making intricate wooden decorative pieces in his

tidy workshop. He's particularly talented with his electric scroll saw, using its precision cuts to create crosses, puzzles, plaques and ornaments.

To teach others his woodworking skills, Lucas makes videos he posts on YouTube.

But his health and ability to maintain his joyful hobbies appeared in jeopardy in November 2017.

Lucas felt a little strange after arriving at work one day. Then he had trouble forming words when speaking with a colleague. Half of his face was drooping.

His co-worker acted quickly.

"Fortunately, she realized what happened. She called 911 right away," said Lucas, who was rushed to a nearby hospital in Indianapolis. He was having a [stroke](#).

Lucas spent two days in intensive care, then about another week at St. Vincent Hospital. Afterward, a stay in a nursing home helped him with further rehabilitation to start walking and talking again.

Soon, he had another way of reclaiming his life.

Lucas developed a passion for woodworking as a teenager. Over the decades, he became quite a craftsman.

"I decided to use my passion to help me recover," he said.

Using his scroll saw, Lucas concentrated on creating delicate, detailed objects. It helped him improve his strength and his eye-hand coordination.

"I gradually got back my skills. It was fun," he said. "The time goes fast, and you feel relaxed, just like you do when you're meditating."

In addition to pendants, signs and nameplates, Lucas makes toys – lots of toys.

He contributes to the large output of the Central Indiana Woodworkers, which produces thousands of toys for disadvantaged children during the holidays.

The woodworkers make sturdy little trucks, cars, crayon boxes and other toys distributed to youngsters through social service agencies. Last year, the club made 14,000 toys; Lucas made about 100 of them. The club members also cut wooden ornaments for the children to paint.

Lucas also makes rubber band-powered racing cars for Boy Scouts and gifts for friends and family. He sells items online and exhibits pieces at the Indiana State Fair.

Now retired from the electrical industry, Lucas, 71, has even more time for his hobby and for teaching it to others.

When he resumed making instructional videos after his stroke, he realized working on them helped him practice enunciating words. He does retakes when necessary. Repetition can help in his speech recovery.

In his first post-stroke YouTube segment, Lucas explained why he was having speech difficulty, then decided not to revisit the subject in subsequent videos. He prefers to keep the focus on woodworking, though he provides a link back to that explanation for viewers who are curious.

He has regained about 85% of his speech. He still has trouble with

certain multi-syllable words. But when that happens, he chuckles and notes, "That's a hard word to say."

Fellow woodworker Jim Wallihan admires Lucas' persistence and mission to help others, especially fellow stroke survivors.

"That kind of doubles the attaboys for him doing a video program on YouTube," he said.

In the year they have known each other, Wallihan has seen Lucas' speech gradually improve.

"He's no shrinking violet," Wallihan said. "He doesn't shy away from getting into that camera situation."

Wallihan and Lucas recently recorded a YouTube video together to explain how to make wooden trivets, used beneath hot dishes on a table. They put on skill-building presentations for the woodworking club's education committee. Lucas oversees the scroll saw special interest group.

"We'll have everybody cutting and creating," Lucas said. "It's virtually unlimited, the things you can make."

Lately, he has worked to build a scroll saw stand that allows someone in a wheelchair to use the tool. He said he wants to spread the message that those with a disability shouldn't let it hold them back.

Despite feeling down after his stroke, Lucas said, he refused to give in to the thought of "this is the end."

"You pick something you like, hoping it will give you inspiration to carry on. For me, it's woodworking," he said. "Use the things you love to do to

help you recover."

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