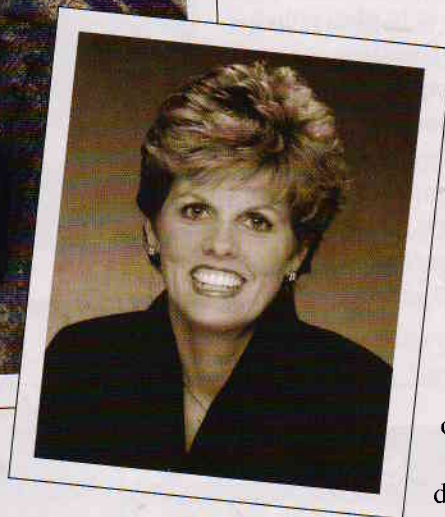
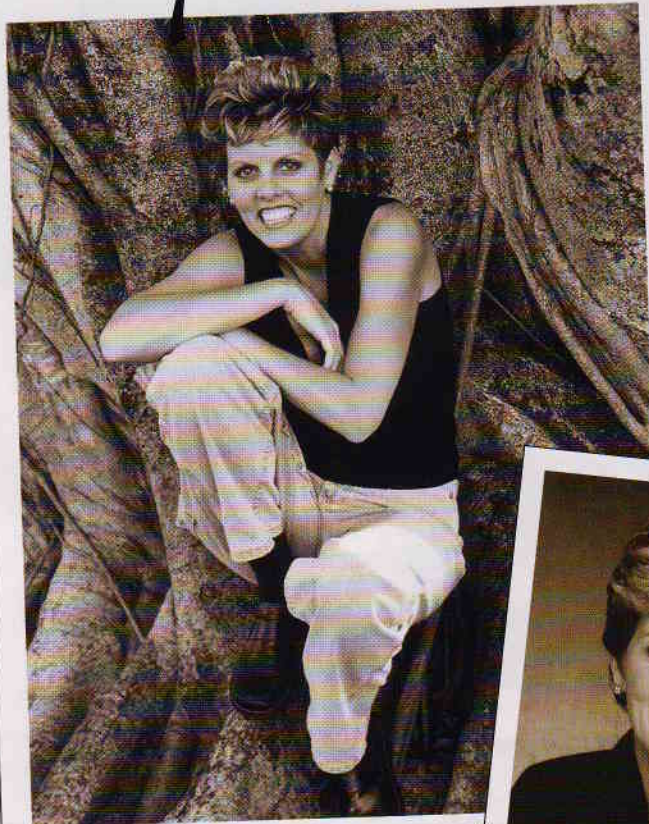


# Finding the Fire Within

by Emily Springer



“Life is short — make a difference,” says stroke survivor Valerie Greene, who’s on a self-proclaimed “survivor’s mission” to educate the public about stroke, advocate for stroke research and help other survivors.

“I don’t want anyone to ever suffer like I have because of my stroke,” Valerie says.

Valerie went to the emergency room in December 1995 with a severe headache. Six months later she went back with severe dizziness. Both times she was sent home.

Ten days after the second incident, she became extremely dizzy. Her left side went numb and she started slurring her words. A friend drove her to the emergency room.

This time, the ER staff thought Valerie was drunk. Doctors performed a CT scan, which did not show a

problem. Their MRI machine was down for repairs.

Thirty-six hours later, Valerie woke up in the ICU paralyzed on her left side, unable to speak and deaf in her left ear. Although the neurologist thought she was too young to have had a stroke at 31, her sister Angela insisted that he run more tests.

An angiogram revealed that she had had a massive stroke due to a blood clot. Finally, she was given the blood thinner heparin. “Unfortunately, I had my stroke less than two weeks before t-PA was approved,” Valerie says.

Once a successful estate planner and triathlete, Valerie now struggled to speak and move. “I was severely depressed. I thought about committing suicide,” Valerie says.

Two counselors visited her in the hospital and told her they would help her accept her limitations. “That made me so angry. I was not going to accept any limitations; I was determined to overcome them.

“That’s when I stopped feeling depressed and felt angry instead. I turned my anger around and told myself, ‘I’m going to fight this stroke.’ I became aware of the fire within me.”

After a month, she returned home in a wheelchair and with 24-hour nursing care. “I grew depressed again. I could not take care of myself,” Valerie says. “The loneliness and depression was so thick I could almost touch it. But I said to myself, ‘I’m in charge here, not this depression. I’m taking control.’ And every day I promised God that if he would give me my voice back, I would never shut up.”

A month later, she traveled to an off-shore clinic to receive live stem cell injections, an experimental treatment not available in the United States. Stem cells are cells within the body that have the potential to develop into any kind of cell. Studies in rats have



shown that after stem cells are injected into stroke-injured rats, they recover faster than those that receive no treatment. (The American Heart Association supports adult stem cell research but does not fund any research involving stem cells derived from human embryonic or fetal tissue.)

Four weeks later Valerie could walk with a cane and could speak in full sentences. She returned home and continued with extensive aquatic, physical and speech therapy three times a week.

physical therapist, called the Orlando office of the American Stroke Association to tell them about Valerie's story.

Last June, ASA staff members asked her to speak as a stroke hero at an orientation night for the Train To End Stroke (TTES) program in Orlando. TTES is a national marathon-training program that helps raise funds for stroke research.

"After my first speech, many people told me that my story inspired them to join the program. That was so encouraging," says Valerie. She began speaking regularly at orientation nights for TTES.


*"I'm in charge here, not this depression."*

Valerie kept a journal of her progress throughout her recovery. In 2001, her friend read her journal and told her that it was so inspiring, she should turn it into a book. She did, and it's coming out this month.

As Valerie recovered, she wanted to help other survivors and to educate people about stroke. "I felt that God gave me my voice back — now I wanted to use it." A neighbor, a

"My stroke lit a fire within me. I knew I wanted to help other survivors and to fight stroke in any way I could. TTES refueled my fire." The camaraderie at the events inspired her as well. "It's like being part of a family."


With so much support around her, she decided to walk in a TTES event. "My doctors discouraged me, but I talked to Linda Banning, a TTES coach, who told me I


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## *Know the warning signs of stroke:*

- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause
- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination

***Call 9-1-1 IMMEDIATELY if you experience symptoms!***

***Time lost is brain lost!***





*Valerie celebrates during the TTES marathon in Orlando*

Not only did she finish the race, Valerie also raised \$11,500. At a victory party that evening, her local ASA office presented her with a bronze shoe for her efforts, and she was recognized as the top fund-raiser in the country for Train To End Stroke.

"It's ironic," Valerie says. "I have speech problems but I plan on making a career as a speaker and stroke research advocate. Educating the public about stroke and helping other survivors is my calling in life.

"I know recovery is a long journey, but survivors must never give up. Tap into the fire within you. Whatever you believe is possible, you can make happen." **SC**

*Editor's Note: Valerie is the author of The Fire Within, ISBN# 0-9748833-8-7, an inspirational book about her stroke recovery. The book will be released nationally in summer 2004, with advance copies available for American Stroke Month in May. To order her book, visit [www.thefirewithin.net](http://www.thefirewithin.net) or call 800-247-6553.*

*"Train To End Stroke refueled my fire."*

could do it. The coach told me to listen to my body and not to push myself past my limits."

At that time, she walked with a limp. So walking a half-marathon, 13.1 miles, seemed impossible. Nonetheless, she started training, encouraged by Linda Banning.

Training improved her walking ability, and after five months she could even jog in place.

During her training, Valerie set a lofty goal — to raise \$10,000, even though the amount required to participate in TTES was only \$1,500. She began by sending flyers to her former clients and several friends. She also distributed flyers to numerous restaurants around Orlando.

In addition to her fundraising efforts, she walked every day, preparing for the marathon at Walt Disney World in January 2004.

On January 11 Valerie stretched her legs in the cold, early morning air with the other marathoners. "It was freezing, about 27 degrees. I didn't care. I was determined to make it to the finish line.

"During the marathon, walkers must finish each mile in 16 minutes or less. Those who can't keep that pace are 'swept' out of the race, because they won't be able to finish in time. On the sixth mile, I saw the 'sweepers' getting ready to take me out of the race because I was going too slow. When I saw them, I started jogging and kept right on going to finish the race."

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