

Making a Difference... Valerie Greene

by CINDY HEROUX

The audience stared at the joyful, energetic woman standing behind the podium and tried to reconcile her vibrant image with the words they had just heard. "Hi, I'm Valerie Greene and I survived two strokes when I was 31 that left me paralyzed, unable to walk or talk." Murmurs of shock, disbelief, pity and amazement momentarily filled the room, but were quickly replaced with the enraptured silence of awe as Valerie shared her incredible story.

More than just an inspiring survival story, Valerie Greene's story is a compelling examination of the human spirit — both at its greatest and its most misguided. With all the drama of an unexpected life, it's a tale of adventure with medical mishaps, travels to a foreign land for forbidden treatments, and angels that watched over her, including a psychic cat. But mainly, it's a story of transformation, how, cloaked in tragedy, one woman discovered her destiny and the fire within.

A captivating speaker with an endearing wit and a great sense of humor, Valerie shares her story with all who will listen. As a Stroke Hero and spokesperson for the American Stroke Association, Valerie has reached out to thousands of stroke victims. Now through her new book, *The Fire Within*, she wishes to touch even more lives with her message of hope. She is also on a mission to dispel misconceptions about both stroke and stem cell therapy, the cutting edge medical treatment that contributed so heavily to her remarkable recovery.

"Most people don't realize that stem cells don't have to come from human embryos. They can be harvested from umbilical cords or even from animals," explains Valerie. "Mine came from a lamb." She is frustrated that the issue of stem cell research has become a political one rather than a medical one, needlessly denying people suffering from crippling injuries and diseases the chance for a better life. "The power and possibilities of stem cell therapy should be about caring for humanity, not politics," says Valerie. She hopes to team up with Nancy Reagan to campaign for increased support of stem cell research and treatment.

The Fire Within opens with Valerie lying in a hospital bed terrified and desperately trying to communicate what she knew was happening inside her head. Because most people think of a stroke as something



that only afflicts the elderly — even people who should know better like the doctors and nurses that treated Valerie in the emergency room — her condition was misdiagnosed, delaying treatments that might have minimized the damage to her brain. "People need to realize that anyone can have a stroke," says Valerie. "Even a young healthy person like myself. That's why everyone needs to be aware of the symptoms so they can get help immediately. Strokes are a medical emergency."

Valerie is willing to do whatever it takes to help raise awareness of this debilitating illness that strikes someone every forty-five seconds. In January 2004, she walked the 13.1 mile Disney half marathon and raised over \$10,000 in pledges for the American Stroke Association. To improve the quality of care that stroke victims receive, Valerie has lobbied both in Tallahassee and Washington for enhancements to treatment protocols by EMS units and hospitals. And whenever asked, she opens her heart and gives of herself to comfort and encourage other stroke victims.

Talking with Valerie now and hearing about all of her accomplishments, it would be easy to underestimate how much she has suffered or how hard she has worked to recover, but the pages of her book leave no room for doubt. Following her stroke, this athletic, independent, successful businesswoman was suddenly immersed in a world of confusing images, fear and vulnerability. She spent years in painful and often frustrating rehabilitation. Her challenges were compounded by strained family relationships, the loss of loved ones, the loss of her home and never ending legal battles. Depression, despair and loneliness were constant companions as she tried desperately to cope with her physical and mental challenges and with letting go of the life she had once known.

But Valerie never gave up. She continued to explore medical and holistic therapies, and through faith, love and the support of family and friends, she found the courage to overcome all the obstacles. Along the way, she began to understand that in many ways her stroke had been a gift; one that would help her to become the person that she was meant to be — a beacon of hope and a powerful voice for change. Her message to others is simple: "Have faith, resist fear, persevere and always move forward."

For more information about Valerie or her book *The Fire Within*, please visit her website at thefirewithin.net.

Know the Signs!

Effective treatments for stroke are available, but to work best, they must be administered within a three-hour window from the onset of symptoms. Sadly, only 3 to 5 percent of stroke victims reach the hospital in time. If you or someone you are with experiences any of the following, call 911 immediately. Time lost is brain lost!

Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body

Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding

Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes

Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination

Sudden, severe headache with no known cause

For more information about stroke, call 1-888-4-STROKE or visit StrokeAssociation.org.

Cindy Heroux RD, author of The Manual That Should Have Come with Your Body, is a dynamic speaker who can help anyone learn to live well. If you would like Cindy to speak at your next event, please contact her at 407-366 6337 or visit her website for more information. speakingofwellness.com.