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## The Comeback Kid

After suffering a stroke, Omahan back to routine

By Jennifer Tanous

**Y**ou've got the whole world in your hands, and your whole life ahead of you. Imagine being 28 years old, in the prime of your life. You're in great shape, you've got a great job and an even brighter future.

Then, it strikes you.

It is the third leading cause of death, and it kills more than 275,000 Americans each year. It is stroke, also referred to as brain attack. Stroke occurs when blood flow to the brain is disrupted, either by a blood clot, vessel blockage or vessel breakage. Brain cells die – even after just a few minutes – when they no longer receive oxygen and nutrients from the blood or when they are damaged by sudden bleeding into or around the brain.

When brain cells die, loss of brain function occurs. This loss may include impaired ability with movement, speech, thinking and memory, and all other vital body functioning. Effects depend on the size and location of the stroke. A small stroke may result in only minor problems such as weakness in an arm or leg. Larger strokes may cause paralysis, loss of speech, or even death.

Omahan Anthony Carlson suffered from an ischemic stroke, or a clot blocking the blood supply to his brain. He was found passed out at his kitchen table. When he came to, he saw double. This effect lasted for six hours. The first hospital he was taken to released him after only cursory tests. He guesses that because of his youth and physical fitness, the possibility of a stroke was a remote diagnosis.

The next day, Carlson began losing control of his motor skills. He was unable to walk, lost the use of his right arm and experienced numbness in the right side of his face. He was admitted to the University of Nebraska Medical Center for five days, where he received the appropriate treatment, and began his year-long rehabilitation.

"More than likely, my stroke was due to hereditary causes," Carlson said. "There wasn't anything physically wrong with me. It was an anomaly."

According to information provided by the Stroke Center at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, stroke runs in families. Family members may have a genetic predisposition for stroke or possess a lifestyle characteristic that contributes to stroke. Primary risk factors for stroke include: stress, high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, cigarette smoking, being overweight and leading a sedentary lifestyle. These risk factors can all be changed, treated, or medically managed.

A recent study of 10,000 Americans found that patients with daily diets including at least 300 micrograms of folic acid, a B vitamin, cut their risk of stroke by 20 percent. Folic acid lowers levels of homocysteine in the blood. Homocysteine is an amino acid that has been linked to a higher risk of atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries that can lead to stroke and heart attack. To lower levels of homocysteine in the blood, you can eat certain foods high in folic acid, such as citrus fruits, tomatoes, leafy vegetables, beans and grain products.

Carlson believes his stressful schedule combined with hereditary factors caused his stroke. At the time, Carlson was working 50 hours a week, attending graduate classes 30 hours a week, and training to become formidable competition as a Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu fighter.

"I wasn't sleeping enough," he said. "It was the stress of work, school, training and taking care of my family. I just didn't sleep."

According to the National Stroke Association, it is important to learn the three Rs of stroke: reduce the risk, recognize the symptoms and respond by calling 9-1-1. Stroke is an emergency and should be treated as such. The greatest chance for recovery is to seek emergency treatment immediately.

Through his own perseverance and determination over the last year, Carlson has completely rehabilitated – he has regained all motor skills and physical abilities. He has resumed the normal daily activities of work, school and martial arts training, although at a more balanced pace.

Last Saturday, Nov. 11, marked the one-year anniversary of Carlson's stroke. It also marked his amazing and successful recovery – he competed and won his weight class at The Gracie Nationals Jiu-Jitsu Competition held at the Ohio Expo Center in Columbus, Ohio.

"I have dedicated the last year to becoming a champion. I am not a champion for my performance, but for dedication and the ability to continue Jiu-Jitsu," Carlson said. "I want to become a champion in the sense of overcoming all obstacles in life." 