

Mrs. Ohio International & Stroke Survivor - Jeri Ward

Jeri Ward is the current Mrs. Ohio International, who in 2018 heard a popping sound in her head and instantly knew something was not right.

Social:

www.instagram.com/mrsohiointl2021/

www.thelemonadeproject.com

www.instagram.com/self_care_lemonade/

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Bill 0:00

So, your carotid artery is still blocked?

Jeri 0:06

Yeah, forever.

Bill 0:08

And it's not going to unblock?

Jeri 0:10

Nope.

Bill 0:12

Do you know why it's still blocked and why it's never going to unblock what caused the block?

Jeri 0:17

Yeah, so actually blood clots caused the blockage. And they caused so much damage in my carotid and in my areas of my brain. That you can't replace it or fix it at this point. And I actually went through multiple surgeries, and they still could not remove all the blood clots in my brain, because they said that it would cause more damage than any good so I still have blood clots in my brain, and then my carotid that will never be removed.

Intro 0:53

This is the recovery after stroke podcast, with Bill Gasiamis helping you navigate recovery after stroke.

Introduction



Bill 1:05

Bill from recoveryafterstroke.com This is Episode 142. And my guest today is Jeri Ward, Jeri experienced an ischemic stroke in 2018. And today is raising awareness about stroke through the Mrs. International pageant, where she competed and won the Mrs. Ohio International crown.

Bill 1:28

Now, if you have enjoyed any of the recovery after stroke podcasts, please share your favorite episode on social media give the show a five-star review on iTunes.

And if you're watching on YouTube, please give the show a thumbs up and subscribe to be notified of the most recent episodes.

Bill 1:47

Your support with this will make it easier for other stroke survivors to find the show and perhaps feel better about the situation they find themselves in. Thanks so much for listening. And now it's on the show. Jeri Ward, aka Mrs. Ohio International. Welcome to the podcast.

Jeri 2:04

Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate your time.

Bill 2:08

My pleasure. Thank you for being here. I love the outfit. I love the red. Red seems to be part of your color scheme. It's on your Instagram, it seems to follow you everywhere. It really it's the color are some stroke awareness. campaigns were read for stroke and all that kind of thing. It is Stroke Awareness Month in the US this month in May.

Jeri 2:35

Yes, it is.

Bill 2:36

And you're wearing your beautiful Mrs. Ohio. What do we call those?

Jeri 2:42

Well, it depends where you're from, but we call them sashes. They're also called banners. Whatever you fancy.

Mrs. Ohio International



Bill 2:49

Okay. Before we talk about stroke, Tell me about how you get to be Mrs. Ohio International.

Jeri 2:58

Absolutely. Well, the international system. Most people don't know because there are tons of pageant systems and a lot of people actually have never competed or been involved in pageant, but the system itself, you either compete or apply to be a state or national titleholder or international titleholder so we will actually be competing in July against people from all over the world in Kingsport, Tennessee.

Jeri 3:26

So I'm very excited. We actually have a Mrs. Australia. And so all over the world, literally. And it's just a beautiful thing where we all come together. And obviously, I'm passionate about stroke. And there are about 50 other women that are passionate about different things. And we're just a powerhouse force to be reckoned with in a long weekend.

Bill 3:50

Fabulous, what's the point of the pageant? So I know it's very much about raising awareness for different causes. What's the reason it started? How did it get to be this massive event?

Jeri 4:01

Yeah, so the international system itself was born, basically on the premise that women have a lot to offer, and they have a lot that they're passionate about. And it seems that when you have sashes and I don't know if you can see my shiny

crown up there. But whenever you have those things on people pay more attention to you.

Jeri 4:23

And so that platform really helps you to get out there and be passionate and bring education awareness to what matters to you. And I've also found that women especially when married and or have kids, you know, they're occupied and they put themselves on the back burner a lot of times and it actually ties into my stroke story but more on that later.

Jeri 4:48

But this is really an opportunity to be your best self to get yourself in the best shape possible to represent something that you really believe in and just celebrate being accomplished and a married woman, all in one.

Bill 5:03

Wow, sounds like a very simple idea and an amazing cause. Now, you need to go back to that bookshelf of yours and grab that crown.

Jeri 5:18

You wanna seen my crown?

Bill 5:20

Yes.

Jeri 5:22

Hang on, just second I'll grab it for you.

Bill 5:24

For the people that are listening on one of the podcast channels, you need to jump onto the YouTube channel, I'll have all the links there. So you can see this amazing crown. Oh, my gosh, it's awesome.

Jeri 5:38

This is it. How can you not pay attention to someone with this on their head? Right?

Bill 5:43

I know. Absolutely.

Jeri 5:45

Magic. So people oftentimes think that pageants are just for showing off yourself. And there is an element of that of being proud of who you are, and how hard you work. I'm not going to take away from that, because we work really hard.

Jeri 6:05

But truly, the main point of this is to get out and make a difference, and I actually just got to lobby and speak in front of the Senate and the House of Representatives about a stroke, transportation, law, all thanks to this guy. So I think it's just so much more, but that's a totally different podcast that we could go over a different day.

Bill 6:30

Yeah it sounds like it's really important. And you're right, there's different ways to bring awareness to yourselves animals in the animal kingdom, if you think about the peacock, has all these beautiful feathers behind it. And its whole purpose is to bring attention to itself. Otherwise, it would just look like a boring bird like every other bird.

Bill 6:51

It goes to a lot of trouble to make people notice it. And sometimes, that's what we need to do, we can talk and talk and talk. But if there's not something separating us from the crowd, what happens is you get to blend into the crowd to people that do something different.

Bill 7:08

You look at artists around the world, it's all the weirdos, and the different ones and the ones with weird hair and different color that we all gravitate to. And we make international success stories, because they are the ones that stand out and it seems like the message is more likely to get through, and more likely to infiltrate, you know all the noise that you hear from the regular crowd, I suppose.

Bill 7:38

And not that there's anything wrong with the regular crowd. This is just a bit of a it's a great example of people who are watching and listening who are stroke survivors and do want to share their story is you've got to be a little bit eccentric, you got to be a little bit out there. And maybe there isn't an official pageant that you can be a part of, in your part of the world. But make yourself a crown and a

sash and call yourself whatever you want.

Jeri 8:05

Absolutely, there's no shame and calling it as you need it and becoming whatever you need to be. And I think that's, you know, that's the biggest part, I think, as survivors, especially is that if we want to make real change. So survivor, we just have to get out there, it doesn't matter what kind of survivor you are, maybe you're not even your stroke survivor.

Jeri 8:29

There's no one more important than anyone else. And this doesn't make me any more important than any other survivor in the entire world. But what it does allow me to do is get out there and have my voice heard. So I think it's just about being shamelessly yourself and kind of relentless in your nature to get stuff done.

How Jeri Ward had a stroke



Bill 8:52

Okay, I'm gonna ask you about the stroke now, and then we're going to loop back because I want to understand how all this connects. But first, what happened to you?

Jeri 9:03

Oh, that's a long story. I'll try to make it as brief as possible. But um, so on October 25 2018, I was a social worker, and pretty avid volunteer in my community of Ohio. And during that time, you know, we're all faced stress and I was pretty stressed with my Social Work career and all the activities that I was participating in.

Jeri 9:31

And because of that, I had a headache for about four days and it just got to the point where on the fourth day that I just had to go home from work early and I was struggling really badly. I mean it was just a pounding headache. I even had some neck pain involved as well, nausea.

Jeri 9:50

I came home threw up a couple of times, took a bath and just tried to relax and rest my head and shockingly the headache went away completely. But later that night, about 10pm, I was sitting on the couch with my husband. And I was working, of course, because typical workaholic myself, and I was working on my laptop for the next day, and I heard a loud pop in my head.

Jeri 10:19

And I felt a bit of vertigo, almost as if the room was spinning and I was still sitting still and vision blurriness. And in that time, after the pop, they kind of fizzled out like the sound of fireworks. And that was the moment that I just knew something was not right anymore, I could just feel in my soul that things were not the same.

Jeri 10:44

And I tried to tell my husband that I was not feeling well, that something weird just happened to me. And in that moment, I realized I couldn't speak at all also couldn't move at all. So I was stuck for at least 10 seconds, which that doesn't sound like a really long time. But when you're trying to speak and move and you're unable to, that feels like an eternity.

Intro 11:09

If you've had a stroke, and you're in recovery, you'll know what a scary and confusing time it can be, you're likely to have a lot of questions going through your mind. Like how long will it take to recover? Will I actually recover? What things should I avoid in case I make matters worse?

Intro 11:26

Doctors will explain things that obviously, you've never had a stroke before, you probably don't know what questions to ask. If this is you, you may be missing out on doing things that could help speed up your recovery. If you're finding yourself in that situation, stop worrying, and head to recoveryafterstroke.com where you can download a guide that will help you it's called the seven questions to ask your doctor about your stroke.

Intro 11:53

These seven questions are the ones Bill wished he'd asked when he was recovering from a stroke, they'll not only help you better understand your condition. And they'll help you take a more active role in your recovery. head to the website. Now, recoveryafterstroke.com and download the guide. It's free.

Jeri 12:12

And so I was finally able to say some stuff after about 10 seconds. And my words were coming out all jumbled up. And I was saying things that I did not mean to say at all. I was trying to say I need help, I needed to go to a hospital like we need to get medical care.

Jeri 12:32

But it was coming out car house dog cat and just from nowhere and I was sitting there and honestly I was kind of giggling out myself, like why in the world is going on. I got to stay at 30 years old, there was no part of me that suspected a stroke, because that only happens to old people, right? That never happens to someone 30 years old. But I was finally able to say hospital. And my husband took me to the hospital at that point in time and it was pretty terrifying.

Bill 13:10

Now that you know the pop noise, what was it? What popped?

Jeri 13:16

Yeah, so what to my understanding with my lack of medical degree. What actually made that popping cell was the blockage in one of my arteries. So my carotid artery which is the main source of blood to the head through the neck. Little anatomy lesson for anyone who doesn't know you had two carotid arteries in your neck and vertebral supplemental arteries that run through the back of your neck into your head.

Jeri 13:47

Your carotid arteries are actually the main source of blood to your brain. Obviously, blood is very important to the brain for functioning and perfusion. But at that point, it was completely occluded. And so that means that it was completely stuffed up. So you kind of think, like if you're tucking a pipe inside of your house, and you have long hair and you go to shower, and of course all the water sits on top because you haven't cleaned out the pipe.

Jeri 14:19

That is kind of what happens in the carotid artery in that moment. And so, fun fact my carotid artery is still occluded to this day and it will never be able to be repaired. So that was what the initial pop was and then the fizzling out, I don't know what that was.

Jeri 14:40

I think, for me in my opinion, that was just a lot of neuroanatomy dying at that point in time because we know that 2 billion neurons die per minute. And so I think my brain just got tired in that moment in losing that lack of perfusion in blood I really shut down my brain.

Permanent Blood Clot



Bill 15:03

So your carotid artery is still blocked?

Jeri 15:09

Yeah, forever

Bill 15:10

And it's not gonna unblock?

Jeri 15:13

Nope.

Bill 15:15

Do you know why it's still blocked? And why it's never going to unblock what caused the block?

Jeri 15:20

Yeah, so actually, blood clots cause the blockage. And they cause so much damage in my carotid and in my areas of my brain that it is you can't replace it or fix it at this point.

Jeri 15:35

And I actually went through multiple surgeries, and they still could not remove all the blood clots in our for my brain, because they said that it would cause more damage than any good. So I still have blood clots in my brain, and then my carotid that would never be removed.

Bill 15:53

Okay, interesting. So then people are going people listening, and even me, because we don't know much about anything with regards to the medical thing. How come you're still able to talk? smile, laugh, look at us. How can all this be happening? I understand briefly, but you tell me, do you know? Have you asked that question?

Jeri 16:16

Yeah, honestly, I'm able to do all that because the human body is absolutely amazing. and neuroplasticity is amazing. And I put in a lot of hard work during that time. So the region of my brain that was most severely damaged was the Broca's area of the brain, which is responsible for a lot of speech, and a lot of fine motor activities, gross motor activities, etc.

Jeri 16:46

So the most things that were damaged was my ability to speak, move, read and write. So I lost the ability to do all of those things. Luckily, I think we've found through medical that, that stroke survivors, the younger they are, the better off their odds are because you have something called neuroplasticity, which is the brain's ability to kind of recuperate and rebuild neurons after they die.

Jeri 17:16

The older you get, the more difficult that becomes. And so I'm very thankful for my age, I'm very thankful for how healthy I was, when I had my stroke. My doctors told me multiple times that I would not have made, the recovery that I

made had I not been in as good a shape as I was going into the stroke. So I think that's a testament to keeping healthy because you never know what life is kind of throw at you. And just do the best that you can.

Bill 17:46

How long were you away from home?

Jeri 17:51

A month, so I was released from the hospital. And after I was released, I did intensive speech, occupational and physical therapy for an outpatient. So I did that I couldn't work obviously, I didn't even know what letters were numbers were anymore. I couldn't read or write at all.

Jeri 18:14

So work kind of went out the window. Then I did that from home for so was about six months or so. And so I guess it depends by recovery is always recovering. I don't think you ever stop recovering. Thank God. But my main sense of recovery was about a year and a half on.

Bill 18:39

Yeah, in that time, how does your husband manage all of that? How does he cope? Because it's traumatic, and it's very scary. And here is my wife in hospital. She almost passed away and is there children?

Jeri 18:56

No, no children.

Bill 18:59

But still this whole situation, how does your husband deal with all of this? What is his main focus?

Jeri 19:09

I think keeping me alive and stain is his main focus. And that may just be a regular basis pre and post-stroke as well. I don't think that was just stroke-induced. But truly, you know, he married who was this 30-year-old woman and then he got this toddler again, right because I couldn't move without him, I couldn't read or write, I couldn't talk at all so I couldn't even comprehend phone calls or make phone calls or doctor's appointments or anything.

Jeri 19:49

I remember he had to bathe me during that time as well. drive me everywhere. So you know people often say that must have been so hard for you and for me, I'm just like my poor husband. Like he was the one that really had the difficult part because I was cognizant, but he was more self-aware of everything and the intensity and severity of the situation, I think more so than I even was.

Bill 20:19

Was he involved in bathing you while you were in the hospital, or was that done by the nursing staff.

Jeri 20:26

So I had an a tremendous nursing staff, and they actually took care of all that. But he was responsible for helping to set up all the doctor's appointments to set up all the rehab appointments, to make sure that everything was paid for because we had over like \$27,000 in medical bills during that time. He was also responsible for like sorting, me leaving my job, because obviously, I was not able to do that myself.

Jeri 20:57

So everything that allowed me that made me an independent functioning adult, he then had to take over that because I was literally a 115 pound toddler. And so I just think a lot of people overlook the caretaker and really, how much work and how much effort they have to put in to caretaking someone else? And the toll that takes on someone?

Bill 21:28

Was that something that you were aware of at the time, when you're at your worst when you're quite unwell? Are you aware of him? Or is there no opportunity for you to be aware of him?

The Right Kind Of Treatment



Jeri 21:41

Yeah, the thing is, is I was completely cognizant the entire time, I was awake, during all my surgeries, I was awake when they were in my brain, and I could see the screen. When they were in my brain, the arm in front of me, I could see them moving everything. And I had an incredible medical staff that would talk to me the entire time, make sure that I was okay.

Jeri 22:05

I was very grateful that I was still spoken to as if I was a real person, as if I was there. I never had a single medical professional talk to my husband instead of me. And so I think things like that just mean a lot. Because we're not able to do anything but move your eyes, that sense of people realizing that you're still a real person, and that you still matter, despite the fact that you can't respond. I think that kind of care is crucial, just kind of validates you as a human being.

Bill 22:41

I left when I was unwell. At the very beginning of the first week, I was at a hospital near home where the doctors were talking about me at the end of my bed. And they weren't including me in the conversation and I imagined they had some things to talk about that didn't need to include me, that was fine.

Bill 23:00

But there was a lot of the conversation was amongst themselves. And when I had questions to ask, there wasn't enough answers. And even if the answer was we don't know, we don't have an answer for that there wasn't even that. So I got really annoyed at that hospital and I discharged myself from that hospital, we

went to another hospital, took all the medical records with me.

Bill 23:22

And found somebody who was going to talk to me and include me in the decision-making and in the conversation. And that was a game-changer because then even though in a situation where I had little control of the situation, I felt like I got some control back.

Bill 23:40

And I was able to feel good about the decision-making process about my own health and well-being going forward. So I really relate to what you're saying. And a lot of doctors, perhaps overlook the patient, especially when the patient can't speak. Or when the patient has lost their ability to communicate properly. There is a tendency to overlook them.

Bill 24:03

And I kind of understand how that might happen. But I think there needs to be a better focus more focus on the person who is unwell and get them to communicate one way or another however, you can if at all possible, get them to communicate with you. It just makes people feel better about the situation which is really terrible. It just makes it feel better. So I can relate to that. Your husband, is he at work at that time or does he have to take time off work what happens there?

Jeri 24:38

So he actually was supposed to be away but luckily that night he was not I literally would not be here without my husband that night. As far as the medical care. I knew he had to take time off from work. And then of course driving me to all my appointments and everything.

Jeri 24:56

He had to do that in between work. I had a lot PTSD, after my stroke, just the constant anxiety and fear that it was going to happen at any second again, and I was going to die this time, and being alone was the most terrifying feeling in the entire world. And so he would be like, I need to take a shower and it'd be like, Can I sit in the bathroom with you? Like, I could not be at a site for someone.

Jeri 25:25

So I think that's a lot of overlooked things as well. Is that the caregivers mental

health, because we're needy, we're needy, when we have a stroke, we need all the help and and love and care that we can get. And sometimes I can imagine he never complained. But I can imagine that in his mind, he was like, please am an adult let me shower by myself for a few minutes. Right. But he had to take time off. And he never complained he did it very graciously. I more appreciate than I could ever explain.

Bill 26:05

I would have been complaining and groaning and moaning.

Jeri 26:08

No, you would have you would not. I share in the back of your head, you would have been like Jesus lady, let me have a few minutes by myself. But no you would have.

Bill 26:21

I reckon I would have been less patient than my wife was, I reckon I would have been maybe not in front of her. But I think I would have been at counseling, I would have been whinging and complaining about her or something like that. And I would have been completely oblivious. And it would have been fair enough. Because I wouldn't have had any clue what stroke is.

Bill 26:40

Because we're not medical professionals, we're normal human beings, we're going about our daily life. Now we have to learn about stroke, and what happened to us as well as how that affects everybody else. But there's no skills that you're given when you get married to deal with that stuff. There's no boost, you've got to learn on the go. And I'm also extremely grateful that my wife she never complained, and I never heard it.

Bill 27:08

But she did a tough sometimes because I was cranky, I was really unwell and being difficult because it was difficult for me and I didn't know how to handle it. Now, you said something really cool which I wanted to ask about which was you had PTSD, which I'm assuming means that you don't have so much now or it has eased.

Bill 27:31

There's people listening and watching now who are going through exactly what

you're going through, then they are probably going through that right now. Because they're in the early phases of stroke. How did the PTSD is off? And how did things start to get better? Let's give him a little bit of a glimpse into the future.

Jeri Ward Dealing With PTSD



Jeri 27:51

Yeah, so honestly, each day gets a little bit easier. And I wouldn't say a lot. When I say a little I only need a little bit like this, like the slightest slither of joy is brought back into your life each morning that you wake up and you're like, Oh, I made it. Like I'm still alive. And you kind of move you're I don't know, if the listeners have the numbness, their inability to feel their fingers and toes and that kind of thing. But you kind of move everything.

Jeri 28:25

They're like, okay, it's also here. But I think you kind of resort back into that childlike behavior of just needing an adult and needing to be safe and needing to be cared for. And I think that that primal nature of I just want to stay alive. And I just need help. And I think you start to get your competence back a little bit every day.

Jeri 28:54

I personally ended up going on anti-anxiety medication, because I felt like I was just drowning. And that was the best decision I've ever made. I'm still on the medication, I don't ever want to go off the medication. It has made me feel as

though I can breathe easier each day. And it really reduces my anxiety. I do still have those moments every now and then just being completely honest, where I'm like, Oh, that was a close one like that could have been a lot worse than it even was.

Jeri 29:32

And you know, with the job that I have now actually work in the hospital that I had my stroke. And you know, seeing my ICU room and watching ICU patients in the room that I was struggling in every single day and even watching people die in the room from a stroke. There's a lot to it right? There's a lot to compartmentalize. into process and I just say, you know, you, you've got to do what's best for you. If medication is best for you, that's okay.

Jeri 30:11

If therapy is best for you, then that is okay. If crying once a day makes you feel better as you release your emotions, and that is okay, too. There isn't a book, unfortunately, a textbook to walk us through this. And I wish there was, but every stroke, every situation, every person is too different. So you just really have to lean into other stroke survivors.

Jeri 30:38

And I remember I read a book from a stroke survivor. And she was just mentioning things that bothered her and things that she feared and she's fully, fully recovered now. And I was just like, yeah, that's me. And so I think finding other people who are step ahead of you as far as in your stroke journey, and really finding solace and peace in that, that can be you just give it time and be patient.

Bill 31:08

Yeah. Was counseling something that was good for you? Is that something that you did do or?

Jeri 31:16

Yeah, I guess so I only had a short spell of it. But it was good when I did it. You know, the fear of dying is actually something that most people have. But the thing is, when you're that close to death, I think that's a whole new element of the fear. I even remember things like my first Fourth of July for Independence Day for the US, we always have fireworks, of course.

Jeri 31:48

And I was sitting on the rocks with my husband, in Cleveland, Ohio, getting ready to watch a firework show. And the first firework went off, and it popped in, it fizzled out, and I lost it, I lost it. Because that you can think you're better. I'm on anti-anxiety medication at that point. And in that moment, I was a mess. I was crying, I couldn't breathe, we had to leave. So it's really I can't express patience for the journey.

Bill 32:27

Yeah, it's a great example, what you just said about something triggering an emotion from the past. So I'm approaching nearly nine and a half years since the first incident. And I was at a party with one of my best friends who's a female, and she invited all her best friends, and the majority of them are female, except for me, and there was I think, 10 or 11, or 12 of us girls, and we were really enjoying this party.

Bill 33:02

But the female energy enabled me to talk about stuff that I don't normally talk about around men, and that I had me in tears, the majority of the party, good tears, and you know, really lovely tears. But just one particular lady brought out some stuff in me that I didn't know was there.

Bill 33:22

And, it was not appropriate because it was at a party. But it was really appropriate because it was around the right kind of people. And I just left a little bit shocked that there was so much in there still after nine years. And of course, all the people there were all lovely and supportive. So it wasn't an issue. And I could cry out, and I didn't have to hide or anything.

Bill 33:49

But what I feel like was every time that happens, it helps me to put my experience further back into the past. So I'm not reliving every moment. Yes, a, an incident will occur where I'm talking about the first time I experienced the bleed in the brain, and then the second time, and usually, it's when I'm in a public forum, and I'm trying to give a real honest description of what happened to me.

Bill 34:20

And of course, that honest description sets me off, it creates emotions that come up. And as much as I tell myself, I'm not going to cry in this particular

presentation, I can't stop it. Now nobody takes it the wrong way. everyone appreciates it and they take it the right way. But every time I do that, and I think that's why I talk so much about my stroke in the podcast, and every other place that I talk about my experience.

Bill 34:52

I think why I do it is because it helps me put it in the past and therefore not relive it every single day. But once a year It triggers something triggers. And that doesn't bother me. That doesn't annoy me. That's just like, wow, that came out of nowhere. Okay park that one, get the tissues, wipe those tears away. And just, again, think about why am I on okay now and why it's okay to go through this and why it doesn't really mean anything.

Bill 35:26

There's no real, I don't need to label myself as I'm still weak or I'm still, you know, emotional or anything. I don't need to label myself after that happened. It happened. It's an experience. I observed it. And then I moved on from it. Does that resonate with you? Do you feel like every time you have a little outburst it helps you?

Dealing With Anxiety



Jeri 35:46

For sure. I think, I think what's most important to remember is that we're human. And that's beautiful. Right? Like, we're disasters, we try to do the best we can we have had something deeply traumatic happened to us. And you know, what I'm

studying cognitive-behavioral therapy. I think the point is that traumas so deep in you, and the fact that you can chip away at that superficial trauma, like oh, you know, I made it through the car ride who I walked past that pasa hospital, so I'm okay with chipping that away.

Jeri 36:28

And, you know, I made it through this firework show, etc. And that's all great, but it's okay to feel sad and to feel scared and to feel I was talking the other day about feeling lonely, like strokes are very, very, very lonely diseases. And so for me, what it helps me to heal is actually advocating.

Jeri 36:55

So that doesn't happen to other people, that's very important to me. Each time that I have to tell my story in front of someone else to explain why it is so important. Because someone else doesn't need to go through what I went through. That is kind of my healing process.

Jeri 37:12

And so I agree completely, I think it's very important to find what helps you heal. Some people find that, you know, meltdowns and telling their story doesn't work for them. And that's okay too. But you do have to find what helps you to maintain peace, that is what keeps us sane, and keeps us moving forward. It's so easy after stroke, because it is so lonely, to really recluse and, and to not seek out new adventures and be you too afraid to live.

Jeri 37:51

And if you stay in that place for too long, you're going to get stuck there. And that is my biggest fear for stroke survivors is that the world is completely different now, post stroke. But if you find your new joy, and you take on new the little challenges every day, that that's what it's all about. It's not about perfection.

Bill 38:14

That's what I am. That's exactly what I did. I didn't know what I wanted to do. After the stroke, I was almost stuck in my own story in my own problems and that makes sense. And then I just started to solve little problems. How do I talk about this to a global audience.

Bill 38:30

And that was an idea that a friend of mine put in my head. I was having to talk

about it just in my local suburb. And he said, there's more ways to talk about stroke than just your suburb. He said, I got at the whole planet. And I thought, well, that's a little bit bizarre. How am I going to do that?

Bill 38:49

Well, you could do a podcast. So then I solved little problems. What is a podcast? Okay, how do I get a podcast? What does it mean to have a podcast? How do I find people to talk on it? What am I going to talk about? And then slowly over the years, it became the recovery after stroke podcast, but it started off as something completely different.

Bill 39:08

And, it didn't do much in the first two or three years. It's only in the last couple of years that it's really taken off because I launched it in 2015. And in the last couple of years, I've managed to do almost one episode a week. So that's a big step. But it took ages to get there. And this is kind of what I'm trying to demonstrate and and tell people about.

Bill 39:32

So I love the way that you express the path. It's small steps and little things and plenty of time ahead of us to do it and no need to put too much stress on yourself. I certainly did not have a goal to do one episode a week. Not at all. It just happened. But I know how it happened it just did.

Bill 39:54

So I'm going with it and I've put in systems to support me to do that so that I don't have to let people down all the time and say to them, so I know I made an appointment. But we have to cancel because I've something else come up. If I've got an appointment now, for a stroke podcast, nothing else comes up very rare do I cancel one.

Bill 40:13

And that wasn't possible at the beginning because I had too many doctor's appointments, I had too much downtime because of fatigue, I had too much upset time because of emotional stress and trauma. So I looked after myself. And then as I started to come out of the fog, I started to then take care of other things that were on my mind.

Bill 40:37

And before the stroke, I had no, no sense no idea that I was going to do anything like this ever in my life about any topic. And I'm wondering, was pageantry in your timeline? Were you going to ever do anything like that? Or did this happen all because of your experience?

Jeri 41:03

So that is a funny question that you asked me that. I've done pageants from the time I was four until the time I was 29. And I said, Look, the last pageant that I did in August of 2018, was my last pageant ever, I was retiring, I was moving on to something new, competitive ballroom dancing, I was done with pageantry. I was very excited to kind of close that book.

Jeri 41:34

And then my stroke happened three months later. And, you know, I think you do things in life, for reasons that you never considered, because life happens to us sometimes. Not, you know, having a stroke at 30 was not on my bucket list. I did not check that one off I didn't plan for that.

Jeri 41:59

But I realize it was actually in the ICU bed that night, after my one of my brand procedures, I realized that I'm as soon as I get my voice back. And as soon as I'm able to talk again, I will ensure that I use the new voice, whatever it sounds like to make sure that people don't have to go through this.

Jeri 42:25

And I said, How can I do that? I was like, I'm gonna use TED Talk. So I did a TED talk. And then I was like, well, I'm going to do one more pageant, just one more. Because I know once again, that with this shiny crown, I'm able to get and generate the attention that I need to make sure that bills are passed and make sure that education is served in to the area.

Jeri 42:52

So to answer your question, long story short, I had been but I've retired. And then three months later, life was like you're not retiring yet? You got one more day ago. And so hearing him going to Mrs. International in July, and with the hopes of saving the world is that cheesy? It's real. It's real. It is I am shamelessly just trying to save the world.

Bill 43:20

And the dolphins and the unicorns.

Jeri 43:22

listen, if they I don't know if they have strokes, but if they do, then yes, them too.

Bill 43:30

Absolutely. animals do have strokes. And I almost got in touch with a lady whose cat had a stroke. And I was going to interview her for the podcast, but I couldn't. We couldn't make it happen anyhow. So she had a beautiful poster of her cat. And the hashtag was stroke survivor.

Bill 43:48

This poor little thing. And I just so wanted to interview this lady because animals have strokes. So yeah, interesting. I love that you want to save the world? Why not? If you're going to save something you might as well save the world. I mean, everything else.

Jeri Ward Finding Her Purpose



Jeri 44:04

I mean, we're only here for a short time, right? Like you have to. It is so hard to explain a lot of times but I feel like pre Jeri stroke and post Jeri stroke are two very different Jeris. I've always been a humanist, I've always been a giver of making people's lives easier.

Jeri 44:31

But I never really found my purpose. I honestly just felt like I was always just trying to find like what was important to me. I found that I felt like I had a missed opportunity somewhere and I was doing great work. No had a wonderful husband had a wonderful job, etc. But there's still just something missing. And I'm telling you my stroke was hands down the best thing that has ever What happened to

me? Oh, because I am 110%. Now, the person that I want to be 110%.

Bill 45:10

Okay I can completely relate to that. I say that all the time. That's hard for some people to listen to some people hear that. And they say that stroke is the worst thing that happened to me, how can you say that bla bla bla. And absolutely I get it. And that might be correct for right now, I've met people all over the world who say that and are living difficult, you know, physical lives with regards to their ability and their challenge, they might be using a walking aid or a wheelchair, or they may have lost their perfect job or their perfect this or their perfect that.

Bill 45:47

And it takes a while but you get there. It wasn't day one after your stroke where you went this is the best thing that's ever happened to me, it wasn't when you couldn't walk or talk or use your arms. It wasn't then it was later at some point where you got to be the person whose stroke was the best thing that ever happened to them.

Bill 46:08

I said that and I don't know when exactly it happened. But it was kind of about four and a half, five years in. And I was also doing what you're doing reflecting on all the things that I have achieved and done since then, that were not on my radar. I was way more self-centered, I was my way more about making money and all that kind of stuff, which is fine, because they're important things.

Bill 46:33

But I never paid attention to other people. And I never gave my time to causes that were meaningful and helpful and useful. And I never had a real voice. I never don't believe I had a real voice or a wait for my voice to be heard. And I felt like I had a lot of important things to say. And the only way that that happened was I found myself on the other side of this terrible life-threatening situation.

Bill 47:01

And here I am 142 or 143 episodes later. And they're all stroke survivors that I've met given a voice to let them share and heal some part of their story. And also, who knows what that's going to create for them. But for me, it's given me a worldwide audience that I get about three and a half thousand downloads a month that started from three or two.

Jeri 47:29

Yeah. But that's the stroke journey, right? That's the stroke journey in general. Like everything just starts from one or two. Like when I'm running in the morning before work. I couldn't walk. I didn't just jump up and run. I think, you know, I had days where I cried all day long. I had days where I threw clipboards because I couldn't remember how to write the word A.

Jeri 47:59

One day when I was trying to learn how to eat and, swallow and that kind of thing again, but I was so excited because I could finally get pasta again. So I was all the like, yogurt and jello and that kind of diet. I was like real food. Right? The first bite that it took, I bet the sign in my mouth because of my dysarthria I took my entire tray just tossed it.

Jeri 48:27

And I think people see us now and they're like, okay, you know, good for you guys. Good for you guys like being able to walk and talk and have jobs and, and function normally in society, but they don't realize that they weren't there to see all the before. And, you know, you're saying that you realize that this was a good life situation overall for you. That was four or five years later. For me. It was about a year later. And so once again, the timeframe was totally different. There's no right or wrong for when you feel things.

Bill 49:09

Yeah. Behavior like throwing a tray of food across the other side of the room. Isn't that unbecoming of Mrs. Ohio?

Jeri 49:22

Listen, I'm very real human being, I have feelings. I think that that is what makes me a really strong title holder is that I do not pretend to be perfect. I do not pretend to always have everything together. And especially when I want my food and they want my pasta still through this day by the side of my mouth, you're likely to see some food thrown.

Jeri 49:55

So we're all just once again we're all just human And it's the patience with yourself. I can't reiterate that enough, because you're gonna have days, when you know what was super simple to you before, like holding the fork is impossible.

And learning how to read tie your shoes, impossible. And all these miniscule things, they just become, you know, celebrations, when you can finally do it again.

Bill 50:34

I'm teasing you, obviously. But I say it's important reason why I say it, I say it because we have to be able to give ourselves a break. And also allow ourselves to be silly and do the wrong thing and misbehave. Just once you've done it, apologize after, and try not to do it in the future.

Bill 50:53

But be okay, the fact that you did it and you lost your cool, and you just lashed out, I lashed out heaps of times, and everyone copped the brunt of that. But they copped all the apologies later as well, a lot of apologies. That's the only way you get through it, you have to get through it by being a little bit terrible sometimes and rude and angry and frustrated and annoyed. And then when you get time to calm down, just reflect on your behavior. And if it wasn't appropriate, just apologize profusely for it.

Jeri 51:31

Well, and the people, I truly believe that the people who love and care for you and want the best for you. They will never understand completely, but they know that you're in a difficult new situation, and which you're just trying to learn how to live again. And that I think that's what's most difficult is when you have a heart attack.

Jeri 51:57

You have difficulties internally, but for the most part, you can still function post-heart attack, post-stroke, you're literally learning how to do life all over again. And I threw a lot of things at my poor husband, but he still loves me. And we got through that. And I think in a lot of ways to become tighter and stronger with people post-traumatic situation. But yeah, a lot of apologies.

Bill 52:33

Yeah, that's good. That's fair enough. What about at the beginning, we spoke briefly about the fact that, you know, you're raising awareness, you're doing some work to create some awareness in government departments in government, and you were involved in speaking to a senator or at Senate, or what was that about? Tell me a little bit about that.

Jeri 52:59

Yeah. So I don't know how it is in Australia yet. But I'm hoping to learn when emergency services come to get you at your home or wherever you are. In, you realize that you have a stroke, we have different levels of care, at the hospitals, certain levels of care did not have the highest level.

Jeri 53:20

And so if you have a severe stroke, you're actually not going to receive the help that you need at hospitals are not a level one hospital. And so I am working and testifying our bills to become law to make sure to educate medical professionals, doctors in the general public on what level one hospitals are and what those protocols are to help to save lives.

Bill 53:44

Fabulous.

Jeri 53:46

Yeah. I never thought that I would be testifying but once again, it's one of those stroke thing if you never realize what you are meant to do, until life happens to you. And you have to learn how to manage that. And so now I'm changing laws.

Bill 54:09

Well, who would have thought that you could have a stroke and then change laws?

Jeri 54:16

Yeah, I think life works in miraculous ways. Sometimes, ways that you never asked for, and ways that you never expected. But I think I would like to think that my journey and my situation is a testament to that you have to work with what life gives to you, and you have to make the best of the situation that you're given.

Jeri 54:44

And just because we're broken, doesn't necessarily mean that we can't still survive and make life work. Oh, goodness. Sorry, that was a cat. But I think it's really important. Do you want to redo that?

Bill 55:07

No, not at all that's beautiful. I love it.

Jeri 55:09

Oh, okay.

Bill 55:11

Well let the cat crush the party. There's no problem with that at all. Who is that cat?

Jeri 55:20

This is Snickers. She's my baby, she's 1 of 2. She's the world's worst cat. But I love her anyway. I think we all have family members or friends that are the worst, but we love them anyway, she's my one.

Bill 55:37

That's beautiful. So what I was gonna say about that journey that you went on is, it's not about thinking about the journey is it's just about starting it, and then not knowing where it's going to end up and letting it evolve. Because this is my journey, like everything that happened has just evolved I've never planned once.

Bill 55:58

Sure, some people said, maybe you can offer this or do that or do that. And that may be something that I involve or create or use or access or whatever. But initially, it just started and then whatever comes from it comes from it. And this is how stroke recovery really is. It's just about putting in a little bit of focus towards doing something that you love.

Bill 56:21

And if you're doing what you love, amazing, other things will come from it. And five years from now, you'll look back, and you won't understand exactly how that happened. But you'll be so grateful that it happened. And I think that's the story of stroke survivors and, and I see a similarity in the pageant situation is that you start out competing to become a Mrs. Ohio, for example.

Bill 56:46

And other amazing things come from whether you didn't plan or expect. And that's not why you started, you just started to compete and to meet new people and to have new experiences and to learn from these other people.

Jeri 57:02

Yeah, I think, you know, I'm a control freak, I always have been. But I do have to

say that my stroke really allowed me to loosen up a little bit, and to let me live a little bit. And some of the best things that have happened to me have come from plans that I never made or never intended to.

Jeri 57:26

I mean, I talked to someone in Australia right now that I maybe never would have met. And you know, I hope to meet you in person one day, because I think there are strength in numbers, I think it's, it's important to, to live a little and let life happen and realize that I truly believe that everything happens for a reason.

Jeri 57:52

I don't always understand that reason, a lot of times, but the fruition there were moments in time where I was like, What did I do wrong? to deserve a stroke? Like, I'm just replaying my life and understanding like, what could I possibly have done? But this is what I did. This is this is why. And I'm proud of that fact, it took me a while to get here. But I'm proud of that fact.

Bill 58:22

Yeah. The only thing you did was you're born. That's the only reason you had you waited 30 years and then you had a stroke to say anything you did, you're born that no one else plans, that that's just part of life, it's part of our process. And we are oblivious to really those things until it happens to us.

Bill 58:42

And unfortunately, at 30 It's too early for somebody to have a stroke, any age is too early, but it's really early. But at least it allows you to have a lot of time ahead of you re realigning your life and re configuring it so that it's a better version of life for you and maybe this is the message that you needed. I don't know, um, you know, this is me talking about myself as well, you know, that's kind of what it was.

Bill 59:10

And I'm taking it as an opportunity to grow and evolve. And I think once you get beyond the initial trauma and all the really, really hard days, there are better days to come. And that's really what we're trying to do is create awareness and let people know that we are a number of years ahead of you, perhaps and this is how we are talking about stroke now and we weren't talking about it like that early on.

Jeri 59:38

Absolutely not.

Bill 59:40

This is your time is going to come there'll be some time in the future where things are going to feel better. look better. sound better, be better. Just you'll get a it'll be a matter of time.

Jeri 59:52

Be patient.

Bill 59:55

Yeah. Well, what can I say? This has been a really lovely opportunity to meet with you, Jeri, I really appreciate your time as we come into the end. And just before we wrap up, can you tell me a little bit about the lemonade project? Because that seems like it's a little other side of you. But it's also part of a lot of what you do. Tell me a little bit about what the lemonade project is about?

Jeri 1:00:28

Yeah. So the main reason for my stroke was due to stress. And I think we can all relate to having stressors that are that are very inevitable. And, unfortunately, life we've all come to realize, you cannot change life a lot of times, but you can change how you respond to what's given to you.

Jeri 1:00:51

So the point of the lemonade project is to take my stressful lemons and make lemonade. And what I do through that project is I actually teach free coping skill classes, stress relief classes, and help people to understand what healthy living is.

Jeri 1:01:11

Because I think that is one of the main points of having a happy and successful life is, is to learn how to cope with with what life throws at you. And so, the lemon a project was born actually, when I was in speech therapy. I didn't know how to read or write yet, but it's like what they learn it's game on, we're gonna get this ball rolling.

Jeri 1:01:35

And so I've been able to speak to over 31,000 people and 28 countries and teach them self-care techniques. And really teach them how to prioritize themselves and to teach them that they are important. They are worth it. And it is long term important to make sure that you're maintaining your health and those that you love.

Bill 1:02:00

Fabulous for people that are listening and want to know more they can go to thelemonadeproject.org and on Instagram they can find you at?

Jeri 1:02:23

MrsOhioIntl2021.

Bill 1:02:25

I'll have all the links to that in the show notes. Anyway, so all the websites, the lemonade project and the link to the lemonade project Instagram. Thank you so much for being on my podcast. I really appreciate it.

Jeri 1:02:47

Absolutely. I'm so grateful that you have me and I just want to say to anyone listening or to anyone watching to you don't hesitate to reach out to myself or to yourself for help or advice or if you need someone to vent to we are the perfect people to do that because we've lived it done it throw in a lot of plates we've been there so just know that you have a support system even if you don't know myself I'm all for stroke survivors because I know how difficult it can be so happy to be here happy to share my message and thank you.

Intro 1:03:28

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Intro 1:03:53

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Intro 1:04:10

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Intro 1:04:30

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Intro 1:04:55

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