

My Stroke Recovery Story - Michael Shutt

Michael Shutt is recovering from multiple ischemic strokes the aftermath of which left him with vision issues and some paralysis. In that time he wrote and recorded the podcast series a lesson in swimming.

Socials:

<https://www.instagram.com/whmike/>

<https://www.instagram.com/alessoninswimming/>

<https://www.alessoninswimming.com/alis-radio-play>

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Michael 0:00

There were a few of them that asked what was wrong with me but not in a way of like, do you need help? It's more like, come on, get it together what's wrong with you? And I'm like, I don't know, like, and even the people I worked with like everyone saw it. But none of us knew. None of us knew what it was.

Bill 0:20

Maybe Is it a mindfulness thing?

Michael 0:23

That was part of it for me, I think because just with that job like I'm, I was constantly multitasking, I was taking care of, you know, 10 people individually while making drinks for 200 people in the restaurant while you know, being quizzed by a manager while having servers like asked me to make change for them or charge their phone or, like it was nonstop. And like I was constantly moving and doing something. And so I was never really present.

Intro 0:58

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

Bill 1:11

Hello, and welcome to recovery after stroke a podcast full of answers, advice, and practical tools for stroke survivors to help you take back your life after a stroke and build a stronger future.

Bill 1:22

I'm your host three-time stroke survivor Bill Gasiamis. After my own life was turned upside down, and I went from being an active father to being stuck in hospital. I knew if I wanted to get back to the life I loved before my recovery was up to me.

Bill 1:37

After years of researching and discovering I learned how to heal my brain and rebuild a healthier and happier life than I ever dreamed possible. And now I've made it my mission to empower other stroke survivors like you to recover faster, achieve your goals, and take back the freedom you deserve.

Bill 1:53

If you enjoy this episode and want more resources, accessible training, and hands-on support, check out my recovery after stroke membership community created especially for stroke survivors and caregivers.

Bill 2:04

This is your clear pathway to transform your symptoms, reduce your anxiety and navigate your journey to recovery with confidence, head to recoveryafterstroke.com To find out more after this podcast. But for now let's dive in to today's episode.

Introduction



Bill 2:21

This is Episode 161. And my guest today is Michael Shutt, who after experiencing three strokes and serious deficits, still managed to create a one person production called a lesson in swimming, which does a remarkable job of raising awareness about the challenges of stroke recovery. Michael Shutt welcome to the podcast.

Michael 2:44

Thank you for having me.

Bill 2:46

Thanks for being here. I had the pleasure of getting to know you off the podcast, we had a bit of a chat. And I think you're an amazing guy first, before we start sharing that with everyone who's listening because I think it's the work some of the stuff that you're doing is really important for people to share, to know about a little bit about what happened to you.

Michael 3:15

Oh, okay. Well, in June of 2015. I was at work, I was bartending. And I evidently had a stroke. I did not know what was happening. All I knew was that I felt like a jolt of electricity went through me. I was in the middle of it. It was a really busy day, it was graduation week in Beverly Hills, and the place was packed.

The Begining

Michael 3:36

And I was the only bartender so I was not just making drinks for 250 people in the restaurant. I was also waiting on everyone at the bar top and stuff like that. So I literally had a moment where I felt this jolt of electricity go through me. I was like, Whoa, what just happened?

Michael 3:52

And I just kept working because I didn't have time to stop. And probably about an hour later. I went to say something to someone and words wouldn't come out of my mouth. Like what's happening? And I kept trying to talk and I literally could not get the word I knew what the words were that I was trying to say, but as I say in my show, which I know we're going to get to but I couldn't get the words that were in my head out of my mouth.

Michael 4:22

And they literally just would not come out. And a friend of mine said to me, she goes what's happening to you? And I being a smartass I go, I don't know, maybe I'm having a stroke. And she just looked at me. She goes, Oh my God, you're so dramatic. And, I was like I know, I know.

Michael 4:38

And I just kept going with my day and I worked the whole shift and I couldn't talk to anyone which makes bartending really hard when you're taking care of people. I couldn't talk to anyone. And I went home that night and came in worked again the whole next day.

Michael 4:58

Again, not able to talk I went a couple days, that would have been Friday, Friday night, I went to a fundraiser Saturday, I directed a play reading in the morning where I pissed off an actor because I couldn't form words to give him notes. And he just kept saying to me, if you think I'm a bad actor, just tell me I was like, No, it's not that, because he thought I was being so careful with what I was trying to say.

Michael 5:24

And he's like, just tell me. And then I went right from there to pitch a kickball

game. my team's championship kickball came like I pitched. And then that night, I made dinner with a friend and so none of these other things concern me. What concerned me the most was when I was making dinner, I wanted to open a bottle of wine, and I couldn't figure out how.

Michael 5:49

And I've been bartending for 20 years, like, I know how to open a bottle of wine. And it wasn't that I couldn't physically do it. I didn't understand how to do it. And that's when I was like, I think something's wrong. And so this was that was Sunday night.

Bill 6:03

How many days later?

Michael 6:09

It happened on Thursday. So Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, so Monday, I went to urgent care.

Bill 6:14

So it took you four days to work out that something might be wrong?

Michael 6:18

Exactly. And I forgot that after I played kickball, while I played kickball, I've been a pitcher on my kickball league for four or five years. And I'm without bragging. I'm one of the I was one of the better pitchers in the league.

Michael 6:35

And I walked the first four kickers. That day I pitched strike after I mean, ball after ball after ball and everyone's like, what is happening to you? What's wrong with you? I'm like, I don't know. Like, and they were like talking about my arm flopping. I'm like, No, it's not. I'm pitching perfectly straight there.

Michael 6:53

It's gotta be something with a ball. The dirt must be off for something. I couldn't figure it out. Yeah, so it's like, all these things happen. And then I went home that night, and I took a shower, and I went to get dressed. And I couldn't lift my leg to put my pants on. And that was another little like, red flag moment, or what should have been a red flag moment that was just like, Oh, well, like in my head. I was like, Oh, you're just being lazy, you need to stretch more.

Bill 7:22

I can relate to that. Okay, I'll tell you what I was working on a job site because we had a property maintenance business. And I'm trying to get on a ladder and my left foot won't go on the first rung of the bottom of the ladder. So I leaned down, picked it up from the knee and put it on the ladder, and then walked up and didn't think there was anything wrong with it.

Michael 7:44

That's exactly what I had to do to get dressed. I literally had to pick my leg up and put it in the pants. And I just kept blaming myself going, Oh, you, you know you're getting older, you need to stretch more. And then with the not being able to talk. Now, I've been an actor for so long.

Michael 7:59

And I was like, you know, you should be doing vocal warmups, you need to be doing vocal warmups. So I got up every morning started doing vocal warm ups and stretching, thinking that was going to fix everything. So then I finally went to urgent care. And, I told them, I Well, I tried to tell them, I said, I can't talk and I can't lift my leg and they're like, we're going to send you to the ER, what they said was, and this is something I'll never forget, they said, we think you either have a bleeding brain tumor, or you've had a stroke.

Michael 8:28

I was like, oh, like you need to go get an MRI. So that's all I hear. And so I get over to the ER. So I don't know what came first the chicken or the egg here. I don't know if it was the stroke that caused this. If this is what caused the stroke, or if it was just getting that news like that I either had a bleeding brain tumor, or I had a stroke. But when I got to the ER and they took my blood pressure. It was 244 over 156 which I don't know if you guys have the same numbers.

Bill 9:00

That's pretty high. Yeah we do.

Michael 9:01

Or what it should be. And they like immediately got me into an IV drip of medication and then got me into an MRI. And next thing I knew I was in the intensive care unit and a doctor came and said you've had a stroke three or four days ago.

Michael 9:22

And this is the thing they said that will haunt me. They said there's also evidence of a previous stroke. And did you know about that? I was like, no. And then they started like berating me like asked me why I waited so long to come in. And I was like, I didn't know like I didn't I like when they said you've had a stroke, the first thought in my mind was, am I about to die because like all I knew of strokes were like I knew like people in their 80's had strokes.

Michael 9:54

And that's was usually the last time it happened before they die so I literally did not know what a stroke was I it wasn't within my frame of reference. I didn't have I'd never known anyone that had a stroke. I yeah, it was not part of my world. And that's, well, that's one of the biggest reasons I ended up doing what I did.

Bill 10:21

I dislike it, to be kind, I dislike or when medical people say that to somebody who's having a stroke. One of the reasons they didn't do anything about it is because they were having a stroke.

Michael 10:35

Exactly. Exactly.

Bill 10:37

That's one of the reasons.

Michael 10:39

Yep. And because, as you know, I've written a whole little monologue about this in my show, and one of the lines in there is like, maybe the stroke screwed up my brain and I didn't understand what was happening. Like, I'm not thinking clearly I clearly was not thinking clearly.

Bill 11:00

But you're not thinking clearly, you don't have any skills to know what a stroke is to understand it to talk about it to recognize it. Everything is working against you. And then the people around you also don't know what a stroke is. They also don't know what the signs are. They trust you. They believe you when you say there's nothing wrong with your hand when there clearly is they doubt themselves.

Bill 11:23

And then they just go on with everything. And they reckon that you're bad pitching game is just an anomaly. Oh my gosh, Michael's had a bad day, you know, we're gonna have to work out what it was. And that's just the way it goes. That's, the challenge of having a stroke. How do we generate awareness?

Identifying The Symptoms



Michael 11:45

Yeah, how do you identify it? And how do you claim it? Because it wasn't just me, like, I wish it would have been one thing if I had been alone for four days and just been afraid to go to the hospital. Like, I was having these red flags, but I was around people the whole time.

Michael 11:59

And they saw them to like, and like none of us knew what a stroke was, like, I was just being a smartass, when I said, maybe I'm having a stroke. I didn't know what that meant. Like, that's just like a sarcastic thing to say.

Michael 12:12

And sure enough, I was. So anyway, I had that one. And I was in the hospital for, I want to say like three or four days. And they let me go. And I had a follow up with a doctor that was sort of assigned to me and the hospital he was not part of the neuro team, or part of the stroke team he's just like the doctor on duty.

Michael 12:35

And when I got to him, and I asked him, it's funny, it goes back to your questions that you tell people to ask. I wish I had seen that. I wish I'd had that list at the

time. But I sort of intuitively knew to have some of them.

Michael 12:49

And I said to him, I said, what kind of stroke did I have? And what caused it? And he literally looked at me and said, Oh, I have no idea it's like our Internet's down here in the office, and so I can't access your charts right now.

Michael 13:02

And I'm like, you called me in here for follow up, and you don't have any of my information? So I left there and I immediately went and got a new doctor. So I got a new doctor, everything was going great, they had me on blood pressure medication, I was working out every day I was eating healthy, I had lost like 30 pounds, like I was, want I say was in the best shape of my life.

Michael 13:28

And I think I was and I was at the gym one night, so that was June. This was in September of that same year, I was at the gym, and I just finished like a chest and arms workout and like, got on the treadmill and started running. And I did a three mile run, I'll never forget this.

Michael 13:34

That night, I don't know if this will resonate with you being in Australia as much as it does here in the States. But the night that I was working out and that I was at the gym, we have TVs in our gym. And I was on the treadmill, I looked up at the TV, and the presidential debate was on.

Michael 14:04

And I was like, Oh, you've got to be kidding me. Like I was listening to them. And I was like, please just turn this off. Like I cannot, like it was not a good presidential debate. It was the primary so it was all the people that don't get elected. It was like all the for lack of a better word.

Bill 14:29

People that don't get elected, I know the ones you mean.

Michael 14:32

Yeah exactly. All of them spouting off and throwing each other under the bus. I was like, Oh, I cannot listen to this. And so I turned on Kelly Clarkson and I started running to her like anything to drown out the debates.

Michael 14:46

And I finished my run and I turn off the treadmill and I stepped off and my gym has an upstairs and downstairs and the door out is in the downstairs. So I was going down the stairs to leave and as I was going down everything changed like I was going down, and then all of a sudden, like, it was like I stepped into a surreal world.

Michael 15:05

Like, my vision went, my senses changed, to cut to the chase, I had another stroke. But this one was massive. And I was on my way down the stairs from my car. And that was what was in my head. I was just like, get to the car, just get to the car, just get to the car.

Michael 15:24

Like, I don't know why I didn't want to let anyone know. Like, I don't know if it was embarrassment, or I don't know if it was pride, or I don't know if like, I didn't want to disturb anyone or what but like, my thing was like, just get to, you'll be safe in the car.

Michael 15:36

Like because I didn't understand what was happening. Because it was such a completely different experience from my first one. And like it was literally like walking through, like a kaleidoscope that's turning. And like I said, like, I could see sounds and hear colors.

Michael 15:55

I didn't know how to make it to my car because I couldn't see anything. So I just kept hitting the unlock button on my keychain. So the lights on the car would flash and the car would honk, so I knew which way to go.

Michael 16:12

And I got another car and I started to back up and I was like, I don't think I should be driving. So I pulled the keys out of the ignition. I threw them over my shoulder into the way, way back where I couldn't get to them. I was like, okay, now I can't drive even if I think to I can't get the keys.

Michael 16:31

And I knew I had to call 911 because that was the one thing. The one thing that I got out of my first hospital stay, was they impressed on me like if this ever

happens again, do not wait. Like, do not wait four days, do not like don't wait for someone else to take you just call 911 tell them that you're having a stroke. And we'll have the stroke team assembled by the time they get you here.

Refusing To Get Help



Bill 16:55

Do you reckon that there's a disbelief situation going on there? Because I did exactly all that I did a lot of those things. So the first time I ignored it for seven days, the second time I ignored it for half a day. Went to hospital but got somebody else to take me didn't call emergency services.

Bill 17:17

The third time I drove myself to the hospital. Like is it what do you think it is? Like is it complete denial? Or is it a missing some kind of like a instinctive thing is missing? Or is it an overthinking head that doesn't want to ask for help annoy people? What the hell is it? Because it's such a serious thing that happens a lot. I hear about it from a lot of stroke survivors.

Bill 17:50

How is it that we just don't ask for help? How is it that we don't say I need help if we couldn't walk, we'd look up and go, I need help somebody helped me walk. But because we can kind of stumble and bumble and mumble our way through, we try and push through in the worst possible time.

Intro 18:09

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, doctors will explain things. But obviously you've never had a stroke before, you probably don't know what questions to ask.

Intro 18:33

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 18:52

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, 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.

Michael 19:12

Well, I certainly can't answer for anyone else. But I know for me, like asking for help is that was harder than recovering from the stroke and like having to learn how to ask for help. That's like I've I have prided myself my whole life on taking care of myself like not that I didn't have my family is incredible, I mean they have taken very good care of me throughout my life.

Michael 19:38

But I like to do things on my own I like to be independent and I like to take care of myself I don't want to rely on other people. And part of it is I don't want to be a burden to other people but yeah, asking for help is that was not easy for me. That was something I had to learn I think I'm still learning it, I'm still not great at it. I'm not adept at it. But yeah, that night like, I didn't know what was happening, but I knew I would like, somewhere inside me. I knew what was happening, but I had no understanding of what was going on. If that makes any sense.

Bill 20:23

It doesn't but it does, because that was me. And I completely relate to that. But it's a topic for a much deeper conversation, or it's a much deeper like, research

project, or something I don't know what it is. But I imagine that very few stroke survivors, you have a stroke, go, I think I'm having a stroke, or something's happening to me, let me call for help immediately.

Bill 20:54

I've never heard of anybody that did that. Not a single person. And you went back to work. And this is the real bizarre thing about all the people that were around you, you're in a bar, there's people around you all the time. And it's okay, that the guests are having a drink. So they're not really paying attention to you. You're the guy who gets them the drinks, and they're paying attention to their friends and their groups and whatever.

Michael 21:18

Wait, let me clarify that. I worked Tuesday through Friday lunches, so in Beverly Hills, it's a very, like business oriented area. So all the people sitting at the bar people sitting having lunch, but they're all regulars. They all come in every day. So they all know me. They all know me very well.

Michael 21:40

And they like they come in and they expect to be, you know, taken care of very well. I know what they like, I know what they don't like, I know what their drink is. I know what they have for lunch. I know what they're allergic to, like, I know if that's there is somebody in their seat, like I know everything.

Michael 21:56

And they expect me, to be there. And but they also come in for conversation. You know, like, they have one hour a day where they can just like forget about everything else. And they just want to, you know, just talk. And so I'm there to talk to them. And that's part of my job. And I know all their stories. And, that was a day where like, I couldn't talk to them.

Michael 22:20

Like they would talk to me like, I'd be like, one was like, what is wrong with you? What like, there are a few of them that asked what was wrong with me, but not in a way of like, Do you need help? It's more like, come on, get it together what's wrong with you? And I'm like, I don't know, and even the people I worked with, like everyone saw it. But none of us knew none of us knew what it was.

Bill 22:47

Maybe Is it a mindfulness thing? Is it never being really present to where you are and who you're talking to? And what you're with?

Slowing Down for Michael Shutt

Michael 22:55

I think so yeah, that was part of it. For me, I think because just with that job, like, I was constantly multitasking, I was taking care of, you know, 10 people individually, while making drinks for 200 people in the restaurant, while you know, being quizzed by a manager while having servers like asked me to make change for them or charge their phone or, it was nonstop.

Michael 23:25

And like I was constantly like moving and doing something. And so I was never really present. And that was years of that, like years of just multitasking constantly. which ironically, is one of the things I cannot do now. That was one of the things that was taken away from me a little bit and and I'm okay with that. I'm okay with slowing down and doing one thing at a time.

Bill 23:52

Yeah, if there's one thing that multitasking, I think leads you into, at least me when I'm speaking for myself is it leads into easily being distracted from stuff. So multitasking makes it so that when the phone notification goes up, I have to look at it when the email notification comes through, I have to look at it.

Bill 24:13

And there's so much junk coming through my emails and phone and messages and some good stuff as well. That I can be forever distracted and in sitting in front of my desk for an hour to focus on some work, probably takes an hour and a half longer than it should have.

Bill 24:33

And it did at the beginning it used to tire my brain and it used to tire my mind by having too much going on at the same time a lot of stroke survivors talk about that as well. So it was good not to do it but I found myself back in that space where I am getting distracted.

Bill 24:53

But those days usually other days where I'm least productive and I don't feel So

good about it. When I get to the end of the day, as you know, I feel like I haven't achieved a lot. And I feel more tired and more exhausted on those days than other days where I've just had a one track mind, for example, to sit down.

Bill 25:15

And for three or four hours to do one task and do well and get finished. There's none of that going on. So yeah, so you've lost a little bit of that multitasking. So that means that, are you better at being able to get other stuff done one at a time? How do you do that? Do you make a list?

Michael 25:37

Absolutely. I make lists. It's right in my well all three of my strokes were in the right hemisphere of my brain. So I became very left brain oriented, I think. And so things like lists to do lists or bullet points or things that are very clear, and structured. That works for me now. Like big concepts, and like, just overarching things like, that tends to overwhelm me a little bit, but as soon as I break it down into a list of bullet point. Then it's much more manageable.

Bill 26:17

How long ago was the stroke? How old were you?

Michael 26:22

It was 2015. And I was 48.

Bill 26:29

And no work at that time. You weren't working?

Michael 26:36

After the stroke? No.

Bill 26:38

How long were you out of work for?

Michael 26:40

I'm still out of work. I mean, I've been well, I've been creating. I've been busy doing that.

Bill 26:54

We'll get to that in a second. But you haven't gone back to the bar job?

Michael 26:58

No, I don't think I could. My left arm still isn't as strong as my right. So I don't think I can even pick up a bottle with my left hand and pour anymore. And I've lost almost all of my vision. I've lost three, quarters of my vision, three quarters, my visual fields. Plus, I have double vision and no depth perception. So pouring drinks is that's not going to be that's not coming up for me anytime soon.

Bill 27:34

People will be wearing most of the drink rather than receiving a bit in their right glass.

Michael 27:39

Well, I either be the worst bartender in the world, or the Best Bartender in the world, cuz I wouldn't be able to see how much I had in there. So people could just keep going, keep going, keep going.

Bill 27:47

Yeah. Okay. But like you said, so in that time you got creative, you were always creative. Beforehand, tell me a little bit of the stuff that you used to do in the arts?

Michael 27:58

Well, I've been an actor my whole life, I have my master's degree in acting, I spent a year in London with the Royal Shakespeare Company studying with them. I've got my undergrad in acting. And I've been involved in theatre out here in LA for almost 30 years now. So I've always been doing something like like that.

Michael 28:21

And I worked with a theatre company out here called Moving Arts. And their mission is we only do original works. So we foster new playwrights, and help develop new plays that will then move on to something bigger, but we help starting off and help nurture it and help it grow.

Michael 28:47

And so I worked with them for almost 20 years, and I had been an actor, but I've also been a director for them and a producer. And at the time of the stroke, I was running a program for new play development, where we took six playwrights each year. And help them develop a play from the ground up over the course of the year.

Michael 29:12

We would do, you know, they would have so many weeks to write a first draft and then we would do a reading of it and get feedback from the actors and everyone, then they'd go back and do another pass at it and we do another reading to get more feedback. And then we would end with a public presentation of the piece.

Michael 29:35

And I co-founded it. And I've been running that for about I think I ran it for three or four years. And I was it's funny when we were talking about the texts and multitasking. When I had the stroke at the bar, I was actually getting texts from one of the playwrights who was angry that what was happening with his play.

Michael 29:56

He wasn't pleased with the way his play was being supportive. And he was texting me non stop, like yelling at me about it. And I was like, I can't talk right now. Like, and that was like, that was another like thing that was pulling me away from paying attention. So I always like to tell him that he was the cause of the joke, but he wasn't.

Michael 30:22

It's just something that I like to hold over his head. Because he said, to me one day with real concern, he's like, did you ever find out what caused your stroke? I was like, Yeah, you did. But yeah, so I had been working in theater for a long, long time.

Bill 30:43

So then how quickly did you switch from, okay, so I'm at home, I'm not working. I'm struggling with depth perception and all these types of things. I've got this skill in theater, I'm not doing that anymore. How long did it take for you to go? I think I'm going to share my story and tell my story. Was it always there for you to do something of your own? Or did it just come from this thing that happened, that stroke?

Michael 31:17

It evolved. I'll say it that way. When I was in graduate school, this was back in the early 90s. Instead of doing like a graduate thesis paper, whatever, we all had to do a solo show. Everyone to graduate had to write and perform their own solo show. And I'll never forget our like, we all grumbled about it.

Michael 31:40

We're like, we're not writers. We're not playwrights, we're actors, and the head of our program said to us very specifically, I've never forgotten this. He said, you're going to spend the rest of your life as actors telling other people's stories. Like, this is the one opportunity you have to tell your own. What's your story?

Michael 31:59

Well, I was 25. At the time, I didn't have a story. I hadn't had a story. But I told one, and it was fun. But at the same time, solo shows gets such a bad reputation. Because to be fair, a lot of them are just vanity projects. They're people trying to showcase themselves trying to get seen on their sort of ripe for comic fodder and satire.

Michael 32:29

In fact one of my friends wrote a solo show that spoofs solo shows and one of the funniest things I've ever seen in my life. But it you know, it's sort of like a trope in sitcoms and even movies, like they pop up like, Oh, God, probably one of the most cliché things you can say to someone is come see my solo show.

Michael 32:50

Like, of course, so I sort of always resisted it. I was like, Oh, god, no, I don't want to do one of those. I don't want to do one of those. But then, as I was sitting there, you know, there's this old saying that like a writer writes, when they have a burning question that needs to be answered.

Michael 33:09

And to me, I was sitting in the hospital, and I couldn't explain to anyone what was going on in my brain? And no one understood like, friends, family, I would say even the doctors didn't understand what was going on with me, you know, a brain injury is an invisible injury, you can't see it. We don't necessarily understand what we can't see.

Michael Shutt Finding Ways

Michael 33:30

But I wasn't wired the same anymore. And I wasn't responding the same to things. And but I didn't know how to explain that. So my burning questions sort of became, How do I explain what's going on in my brain, when I don't understand it

myself. So I started writing.

Michael 33:47

And I just started writing little stories, to help to find the words to explain things, part of it was also that I had aphasia at the time. So even if I did know what I wanted to say, I couldn't say it. I couldn't get the words out. But I found that the weird thing to me was I couldn't say the words, but I could write the words. So I started writing things. And it just started with like sentences and paragraphs.

Bill 34:17

When you're writing words, that you can't say is it flow? Is it like, nothing's in the way of getting those words on the paper. Is it just happening, as it always did?

Michael 34:33

That's a good question. I'm gonna say, yes, but maybe at like 85% if that makes any sense.

Bill 34:41

Okay, and if that's at 85% where is the speaking words? What percentage is that?

Michael 34:47

Oh, maybe it's like 15%, I really struggled getting words out. But, writing them that that was that that fascinated me. And so I started working with writing prompts. Like, just because part of this was also, I'd lost one of the things happened to me was I lost a lot of my memory.

Michael 35:15

And the main reason I started writing, because there was one day I called a friend of mine that was in the hospital, I called a friend of mine. I said, if you have any time this week, can you come visit me? I haven't seen you in a while. And he literally Michael, I was there a half hour ago?

Michael 35:33

What he's like, Michael, I was just there. It's like I was there a half hour ago. was are you messing with me right now? I was like, yeah, I'm just kidding. I'm just kidding. Thanks. So I literally started writing down, everyone that came in, and what, like, what time they came in when so that I could go back and look.

Michael 35:53

And so just doing that like writing that down, like triggered things. And so then I thought, like, oh, if I start writing down some some other things that are happening to me, I might remember them. And it might trigger something else. So with the writing prompts, I started taking this was after I left the hospital, just because I needed something to do.

Michael 36:15

I started taking up writing class and the writing class, it was like a personal essay and memoir writing class where the teacher would work specifically with writing prompts, where we would start in class, and she would just give everyone the same prompt and you just start writing, and probably write for about eight minutes, then we'd stop and share what we wrote and get feedback on, like, where did it how to develop and stuff like that.

Michael 36:41

But I found that, like, as she was asking, like giving these prompts, it was unlocking memory for me that I didn't even know that I had, and all sudden things started coming back. So that's what that's why I kept reading and sorry, I'm all over the mountains right now.

Michael 36:41

But when I was in the hospital, a few different people had recommended, they're like, Are you writing all the time, you should turn this into into a one man show? And I'm like, No, no, I have no desire to to do a solo show. And I'm like, in that the thought of doing that was so daunting. I was like, I can't write a whole play. I can't even get through five minutes, you know, without needing a nap, let alone writing the whole play.

Michael 37:26

But then once I started doing these rank ups, I thought, okay, I can't do a play. But I can do a five minute story. And a friend of mine was doing a storytelling night and asked me to go so I went with her and to support her. And I watched all these people get up and tell these five minute stories all in the same theme. And I thought, Oh, I can't do a show.

Michael 37:26

But I can do that. I can tell a five minute story. And so when we left, I said, Okay, I'm going to commit. I'm going to come back next next month. This is a show that

happens once a month that I don't know if you guys have it out. And that's why it's called the math. It's on NPR. It's a storytelling show. And they're every month they have it, they have a different theme. And you write a story on that theme.

Michael 37:26

And I went home and I looked up to see what the theme was for the next month and the theme was broken. And I had my notebook open. I just wrote down, my brain broke my closing up book, and I went to bed. I got up the next morning and I picked it up and I walked over to Starbucks, and I just started writing.

Bill 38:29

Good stuff happens in Starbucks.

Michael 38:33

The coffee, I guess. But that that was the first the first line I ever wrote. For any distance was my brain broke. And it was all because the theme of that show was going to be broken. And so with this show, you go to these, they're like story slams, and if you want to get up, you put your name in a hat and they pull out you know, 10 names over the course of the night people get up and tell their stories.

Michael 39:03

And so they did the first one they did the second one. The third one they pulled out a piece of paper and they go our next storyteller is Michael and I went and it was somebody else our next storyteller is Michael somebody else, seven Michaels in a row and I was not one of them everytime they would say michael I would like start to get up and sit back down, start to get up and sit back down.

Bill 39:30

How popular is the name Michael?

Michael 39:32

Oh my God I did not. I knew it was popular, I didn't know it was that popular? But so but that sort of like lit a fire under me. I was like, You know I'd written the story I'd memorize it I that was another thing where I'd lost my memory I in the stories I'll have to be you can't bring notes up with you can't bring papers on with you at all. It has to be done off the top your head so I memorized it and I worked really really hard to memorizing it and I didn't know if I was gonna be able to do it because I also had lost a lot of active memory.

Bill 40:05

And speech.

Michael 40:06

And speech Exactly. I was like, but I was determined to do it. And I have a friend who is a stage manager. And I was like, He's the perfect person to work with me because they have to come in at under five minutes. If you go a little over five minutes, I think you have a little bit of a grace period.

Michael 40:21

But if it goes into the sixth minute you you get cut off. So I had him there with a stopwatch and I made him tie me and I kept like doing it and doing it doing it. We, we drilled it and drilled and drilled it. And so that's why I was so ready to do it. And then I never got called to do it. But I was like, Okay, I did this, I got this, I can do another one. And so I did another one, then I did another one.

Bill 40:47

You prepared more stories? Or you actually got to present them?

Michael 40:50

No, I didn't present them. I kept writing them and preparing them. And then I finally end up taking a writing class where the teacher works on story specifically like this, like, sort of gathered a bunch of content. And then she teaches a solo show masterclass. And she's like, Michael, I think you're ready to do a show.

Michael 41:13

So I took her class and sort of like, I had got probably 25 stories about the stroke, and put them all together and tried it out. And it was a six month class. And we ended with a public presentation of our work. And it was, you know, we all had an hour time slot to share stuff.

Bill 41:35

So in the timeframe. So you had the stroke? How many years later, are you doing this? Now?

Stroke Recovery Story



Michael 41:43

This would have been I want to say maybe two years later, might have been 2017 or 2018. I'll have to do the backwards math at some point. It was relatively early because I was processing as I was writing, like, one of the things that she says is writing our stories helps us figure out our place in the world.

Michael 42:19

And, that's what I was doing. I was thinking like, why am I still here? Like what why? Like, why did I live? What do I have to offer? And that's what I was learning as I was writing and to go back to something we talked about before like that whole not knowing and not knowing that I had a stroke and not understanding what a stroke was.

Michael 42:41

That started to become a passion of mine was to share, not only share my story, but to share it so that people would understand what a stroke was like. Explaining strokes to people that have never had them explaining a brain injury to someone that has never had one is not easy.

Michael 42:59

Because like I said before, you can't see it. So you have to find a way to make them understand. And you know, there are a lot of us that are doing things like this. But we're all as I like to say we're all doing it in the way that we know how. Like, I have one friend that is doing artwork, like she's creating pop ups of art displays of like interviewing stroke patients about their experience, and then creating an art piece that expresses what that was so that people have a visual of

it.

Michael 43:32

Then there are people like you and I have other friends that are doing podcasts that are getting the information out there. That wasn't the way that I was going to do it for me. I did it the way that I knew how I knew how to tell a story. And I knew how to make a play that was the big thing for me was I did a bunch of these storytelling nights and I sort of came alive at them I was like, Oh, I can still do this.

Michael 43:57

But then when it came time to turn it into a play, I was like, okay, but I don't want an evening of storytelling. I want it to be theatrical, I want it to be like I'm an actor. I'm a producer, I'm a director, I know how to put on a play. Like I don't want to just stand there and tell a story I want to like, give the audience an experience that they won't forget.

Bill 44:19

Yeah, well, let me tell you about that. So I'll tell you about my experience with your play in a moment. But before I do that, so I think one of the really important things about telling your story, or anybody telling this story, it's purposeful. And if you've ever contemplated what am I doing on this planet? What is my purpose? And you've tried to work that out in your head, you very rarely come to an answer.

Bill 44:48

But when you start doing something, it becomes purposeful and that starts to fill in the space of why am I here? What am I doing on this planet purpose is not thinking thing, it's not something that you create in your head, and then you go about doing it. It's something that you start, and then it evolves into becoming part of your life's work part of your purpose, I found myself saying that, after X amount of episodes of the podcast that I didn't realize.

Bill 45:20

I had got into that purposeful phase of my life, I just thought I was doing it to find out what other people were going through, so I can get help, so I can make me feel better. So I don't have to talk about it with my wife all the time. So, you know, so because it was driving a bananas, you know, and I need to talk about it all the

time. And I don't know why.

Bill 45:39

But I think it's part of how my therapy, you know, comes about and what helps me heal. And then I don't want to burden people who think that I'm sharing with them. Because I'm struggling, I've got problems, I don't want them to think that. So what I do is, I don't talk to the people who can't handle the constant conversation about it. I do I do like this, which is much more purposeful, useful, and actually helpful to other bunch, a whole bunch of other people around the planet.

Bill 46:11

So there's purpose in life is in the action. And then the purpose comes about. So whatever you're thinking of doing that you haven't done for a long, long time, that's been sitting under the surface bubbling away, and you've always been afraid, or you'll do what laid out or you'll get around to it, life's bloody short, just get get started and do it now.

Bill 46:34

And what I love about people who I speak to, on the stroke recovery pathway have taken on a big project. So early on in their recovery is that it helps them recover in their own way. It helps them overcome barriers, test their ability, work out where their deficits are, find ways around those deficits, ask for help get other people in on the project, you know, be supported.

Bill 47:03

And then what ends up happening is you break through these pain thresholds, these fatigue, tolerances, and all these different things that therapy, a therapy session in rehab, or in outpatient rehab, or wherever I won't go there, it won't go there, because they give you the mundane boring stuff.

Bill 47:25

But if you have a passion about this, you can push, you know, it's mind over matter, you can push beyond these, these physical and, and physiological barriers that were dealt with, after a stroke, you can push through them. And there's kind of joy in pushing through them, because you're creating something at the end of it.

Bill 47:51

So that's at least my way to try and motivate people to get to the next point of their recovery, which is find your purpose, but don't do it in your head. Just take action, right. And then I was gonna say that I did listen to your entire podcast series, which is your play, and we'll talk about that in more detail. You'll talk about it for me in more detail.

Bill 48:18

But I don't have a lot to compare that to, other than I've been to three shows in my life that were one person shows. And one of them was with my mum, and my mum's a, she's nearly I think she's 75 76 somewhere of there. And she's conservative, she came from a little village in Greece.

Bill 48:43

And when she came to Australia, she went about raising a family is working, you know, the usual stuff. And she's not very broad minded. And I took her there for her birthday with my wife. And the topic discussed wasn't a topic that my mom and I really spoke about, which was sexually oriented. And most specifically, it was a lady sharing a story about how her lesbian experience and coming out impacted her life and the people around her.

Bill 49:18

And I've taken my mom there for a birthday. And that's the first time my mom and I have ever had a conversation like that ever. And all I was doing the whole time because she's from a Greek background and doesn't completely understand all of the English is I'm forever sharing with her what the protagonist is saying all the time, like through the show, I'm just whispering in her ear.

Bill 49:41

So that was my first experience with a one person show. And it was really difficult to get through that with my wife and my mom and tried to navigate this new experience, right. Anyway, we got through it. And then the other two shows that I went to were One person shows by a lady called Amanda Muggleton who is a renowned Australian actress, she's an amazing actress.

Bill 50:07

And she did a one person show called masterclass. It's the story of Maria Callas.

Michael 50:12

Oh I've seen that.

Bill 50:14

Oh my God, man, I was floored. I was just in awe, front row, right next to Amanda. She was just going through this moment, it was just like, absolutely being in her in this, you know, Time Warp back in this masterclass of Maria Callas telling people how to be the most amazing opera person in the world, you know?

Bill 50:38

And then, a couple of months ago, Amanda Muggleton did another show, which was called, which is going around the traps now, which is called Coral Browne: This Fucking Lady. And that was another amazing experience for me to sit through this show and experience Amanda Muggleton, representing in the best way possible, this lady Coral Browne, who I had no idea about, but felt when I left intimately connected to and I knew her when I left the show, you know, it was amazing.

Bill 51:20

The other three experiences that I'm comparing your show to, and your show blew me away.

Michael 51:26

Thank you.

Bill 51:27

So I really wanted to paint the picture of what I thought is the standard. And then when I got to hear your show, it's like at a standard like it's above and beyond that. So now that I've set it up and made it sound, like it's amazing, because it is and it's a story for every stroke survivor to listen to, and then share to other people, because it gives an insight into what the heck is going on for a stroke survivor during those times. Tell me a little bit about what the story does, is meant to do for the listener?

Michael 52:08

Well, okay, so first of all, what you heard was that you heard the radio version or the audio version correct? So we had workshopped the the actual play, like after I did the first public reading of it, it went on, it was almost two hours, it was over two hours long. And I knew I had a lot of work to do, and I know how to cut it down.

Michael 52:29

So I started working with the director and dramaturg. And we chiseled away at it and really like honed it down, like figured out what it wanted to be like what the story actually was, as opposed to just a whole bunch of short stories strung together. We carved it out into like, what's the arc of the story? What's the journey of this character, like, what, happens? And so then like, once we figured that out, a lot of stuff dropped away.

Michael 52:58

So then we have that. And we did another reading of that. And we've gotten a lot of great feedback. And then we workshop it for about three and a half weeks, we got a rehearsal room and started rehearsing it and putting it up on its feet, got a lighting designer, a sound designer, and really made it into a play like and so we performed that for two weeks in front of an audience and I thought maybe we'd get like, five or 10 people a night to kind of like who wants to come see a workshop of one person shows no one's gonna see it.

Michael 53:31

We sold out every night, we were on a waitlist for people to get in, we had to add chairs. And I mean, it wasn't very huge theater. But still it was a nice feeling to like, be completely sold out. And where the producers were like, Can we extend? I went no, no, we don't extend the workshop, what we'll do is do the production, like now we'll make it a show.

The Physical Challenge



Michael 53:53

Because we were on somebody else's set, like I was rewriting every night, like every night, the show was different because it was a different script every night, like based on feedback we're getting from the audience. But so I did get to put it up on speed. And the the main thing for that, for me was, I wanted to see if I didn't know if I could still physically do it.

Michael 54:12

Like I knew that I could write the show. I knew that I could stand in front of a music stand and read the show. But I didn't know if I could still physically perform a show and maintain that energy for what is now like an 85 minute play. Like, just me like no other actors. Like that's a lot of energy to put out there. And as someone that deals with neuro fatigue, like I was like, is this gonna wipe me out? Like am I gonna be able to do this?

Michael 54:43

Like we had to, we learn things during the rehearsal process that we had to like, Diana, my director who's incredible. She learned that I have a really good solid two hour window of like, intense work the third hour is okay, by the time we get to the fourth our diminishing returns, like, I don't understand what she's saying to me, I'm not retaining anything.

Michael 55:12

She tells me to do something and I go, Uh huh. And then I go to do and I say, wait, what? What am I doing again? So we learned like, okay, so instead of like, you know, 10, six hour rehearsals, we're gonna do 15 two and a half hour rehearsals. So we workshopped it, we had it ready to go, we the company, it might my Theatre Company, Moving Arts, they were amazing.

Michael 55:41

Like, they gave me this opportunity to workshop, the show, they gave me the space, they gave me the designers, they gave me the director, they like, most solo artists, when when they're doing their own show, it's all out of pocket. I didn't spend a cent, they did everything, they covered everything for me, because they believed in it, they believed in me, and they wanted to support me and but they also, I would like to think, saw that it was a good show and show that they could produce.

Michael 56:07

So we did that and got a lot of feedback, I went back to the script, made some more changes. And then we were getting ready to open the show, like we had a, it was gonna be a six week run, we're going to do 30 performances of it at a big theater. We were getting ready, we're going to open on May 9, it was really important to me to open in May, because May is National Stroke Awareness Month out here and I wanted to do it to raise awareness for stroke.

Michael 56:36

And we had our very first rehearsal, we're at the table with all the designers, the producer, the director, the stage manager, me, did the table read, everyone's throwing out ideas, and all sudden all of our phones went off. California went into lockdown. Everything shut down because of the pandemic. So we never did get to open the show.

Michael 56:59

Or I should say we have not yet opened the show. But when that happened, and what like at first we thought it was gonna be a couple of weeks. Then when we realized this is gonna go on for a while. Dianna my director found a grant from the National Arts and Disability center that was giving grant money to people that could produce something during the pandemic, in a pandemic friendly way, like and what's the word socially distanced in a virtual way?

Michael 57:30

So she came up with the idea of doing it as a radio show, and recording it. And so we use this our sound designer, he was both the sound designer and the engineer and the composer. She directed, and I performed it. And we were, we were all in different places. She was in Oregon, I was here in this office, he was in his studio down in Long Beach.

Michael 57:53

We're all on headphones like this and a microphone like this. And just we took it bit by bit. And I think over the course of two weeks, recorded the whole show. And then he edited and edited it together. And I know I drove him crazy because he would send me rough cuts. And I'd be like, Can we take the volume of that effect down a little bit raised this can that crack come in just a beat later.

Michael 58:18

Like, I would almost do it like music like bum bum bum crack, and like, and it's

like, Okay, and so we've really, like really meticulously went through those recordings, and really wove in exactly what we wanted it to be because I wanted the experience to be as if I wanted the experience to be as strong for a listener, as if they were sitting in the theater and watching the show live.

Bill 58:46

Let me tell you I listened to it from the beginning to the end, however long it took about an hour or so. And it felt like I was at a theater because I had all that whole stuff going on in the background. And because I'm not theatrically aware and I don't understand about backgrounds and all that kind of stuff noises and all that type of thing.

Bill 59:10

I just released a one dimensional audios it's me talking and somebody else talking and I don't understand all of that stuff. So when I listened to that it did feel like I was at a theater listening to a felt like a proper theatre production that had been recorded onstage. And then it had just been plugged into a into a podcast kind of format. And those sound effects.

Bill 59:34

Actually, I related to those things that you experienced that were where I think how you're going to bridge the gap between the stroke survivor and the non-stroke survivor, the person who goes in there and doesn't have a clue what stroke is, but then they do know what are lightning strike experience might be like, and how that rattles the body and the rest of it.

Bill 1:00:04

So, it was a sensational overwhelm of my senses like everything and not in a bad way. It didn't overwhelm it crazy. It was like I'm hearing that. And then I'm getting all the layers, the layers in the background, and I'm relating to it immediately. So it was so well produced and so well put together. I just thought it was fabulous. Like, I don't know, am I telling you that I think I liked it enough?

Michael 1:00:42

Thank you. I sincerely appreciate it. And I have to credit both my director Diana Wayne and my sound designer John Zalewski, because John is amazing at what he does, and Diana has such a good well I was gonna say good eye but obviously, a good ear too, like even right from the very first day of recording.

Michael 1:01:02

We started with the first story. And she said, okay, Michael, no, she stopped me and she goes, we're not in a theater, you do not have to project to the back row, like you're talking to one person, like people are going to be listening to this probably on headphones, you're in their ear, just talk to one person and really draw them in.

Michael 1:01:25

And that was so foreign to me, because I'm so used to being on stage and like having to like I don't wanna say be big, but at least like get it all the way off the stage and all the way to the back of the theater. And so she like when she heard it like she heard it day one, like like minute one. She's like, okay, no, we have to reel this in. And it wasn't just about being smaller. It was in fact, it wasn't being smaller at all.

Target Audience

Michael 1:01:50

But she hit the nail on the head where she was like, pick one person that you want to tell the story to? And really, really bring them in. And so she said to me, she goes, do you know, do you know who you're telling the story to? And I said I do. And so I started again, she goes, nope, it's not working. She asked me who I picked and she goes, that is the exact wrong person to be telling this story to.

Michael 1:02:13

And she goes, I want you to pick someone else, someone that you really want to charm. And I went, Oh, easy. And so I picked someone else. And I started doing it. And she goes, That's amazing. She like so whatever you're doing you is right on, like, Who did you pick? And I went, Timothée Chalamet. And she's like, what? I'm like, Timothée Chalamet.

Michael 1:02:38

I don't know him. I've never met him. But his work in Call Me by Your Name blew me away. And like, as soon as I saw him I was like, that's someone I have to work with someday. So in my mind, I was like, This is why you should work with me. Like, but yeah, I mean, obviously, he doesn't know this, but like, someday he'll find out like when he hears that the whole show was sent directly to him.

Michael 1:03:02

But like that changed everything for me. And the two of them together. Well, the three of us made well, I think made a really good team. But we're all pretty detail oriented, I guess is the right way to say it. Like, we were like, having like long conversations about like, one beat in there like, Is it this? Is it this is this? But like we would I would throw out ideas like, can we do this? And John would be like, I think we can.

Michael 1:03:37

And then Diana would like what I love is they both let me throw out any idea that I had. And then they would reel me in if need be. But I it was really important to me. Like Like we said that the people experienced this I wanted, I wanted people to walk away feeling like they experienced having a stroke without actually having to have a stroke.

Michael 1:03:58

I had one friend call me after listening to one of the episodes and this is my favorite bit of feedback that I got. He said I felt like I was inside your brain as it was breaking I was like that's what I wanted to hear.

Bill 1:04:13

See I use way too many words to tell you how amazing it was that person did a fantastically good job of explaining.

Michael 1:04:22

He used all the right words.

Bill 1:04:25

So the show is called A Lesson In Swimming. Tell me why the show is called A Lesson In Swimming it doesn't seem to relate at all.

Michael 1:04:37

It is called a lesson in swimming because I am one of the most stubborn people you will ever meet on the face of the earth. I had decided at one point that that's what all of a sudden I was like, oh that's the name of the show like because it all hinges around. I don't want to give too much away for people that haven't heard it yet. But there is a moment where my dad teaches me how to swim.

Michael 1:05:02

And it comes at a very crucial point in my story or in the experience. And there is a lesson that I learned while I'm swimming. That is when he says that it's about swimming. But to me, I apply it to my life and about the stroke. And that's when a wave crashes over you and knocks you down and you've got two choices, you can sink or you can swim. And, and what's important to me in that sentence, like a lot of people focus on the sink or swim.

Michael 1:05:43

To me, the crux of that is you have a choice. And, in that moment that that's happening, I have the choice to sink, which is easy or to swim. And I decide to swim and I push and I push and I swim. And that's probably why I'm still alive. And so that, to me, was where the title came from.

Michael 1:06:09

Everyone told me to change it. They all wanted me to have stroke in the title. No, like, it should be called my stroke of luck. I was like, there are five different plays and books called my stroke of luck. No, it should be called this should be called this. I was like, it's it's being called what I'm what I say it's being called.

Michael 1:06:25

But so then we finally compromised. I don't wanna say compromise. I came up with the idea of the subtitle is every stroke is different. And that is another important line in the show. Like we've all had you and I both had strokes, we've had different strokes, they've affected different like they're there. Many different types of strokes or hemorrhagic strokes are ischemic strokes.

Michael 1:06:54

There are strokes that affect the left hemisphere, the right hemisphere, the like I had a, one of my strokes was they called the bilateral, which I guess means it affects both sides. There are so many different types of strokes, and you can't compare yourself to other stroke patients. You can only help yourself. I bet that's not the right word. But but you know what I'm saying?

Bill 1:07:17

Yes, your journey is a slightly different journey than the other person's, although it's a similar path, in your journey.

Michael 1:07:24

And we can we can commiserate with each other. I don't think that's the right

word. But we can we can, we can thank you that that's where I'm thinking, I've had a patient, we can relate to each other. But But everybody's journey is different. And so that's why the subtitle, every stroke is different was important. I mean, so and when you see it on the posters, like a lesson and swimming, every stroke is different. You're like, you're thinking swimming strokes, but then you're, oh, no, it's actually a stroke. And so I like the time. But I did get a lot of a lot of pushback on it. But But I think we've, it, we're settled on that now.

Bill 1:08:07

I think so I think it's a good choice. And because it is meaningful in the story, when you hear that part of it is you go Okay, that makes sense. you relate to it. And then every stroke is different. You know, I love the play on words, you know, it's a guy swimming, but then the stroke, you know, takes people to this other place. And then I think they get pleasantly surprised as they go through it.

Bill 1:08:35

Because they experience your whole the hard part of your experience, like the early days, and then as you come through it and express, you know how this has changed your life in a positive way. So it's a real amazing way to, I think, grab people and lovingly shock them into this other ending that they no chance would have expected, I think right? So I'm it's available on Spotify, and it's available for free on Spotify.

Bill 1:09:16

So it's really easy to get a hold of and listen to and it's a quick listen in that. You've even broken it down in chapters, which I love because it's four of them. They're about 20 minutes long each and the whole thing in its entirety is about an hour 36 right. And it's there's no boring bits. There's no bits where you need to stop and you're in and any of that stuff. It's just punchy, right through it just takes you on the journey.

Bill 1:09:42

And it's, you get through it fast and you think Well, I've already finished it and man it's like it's such a, you know what it is it's a very lovely, a succinct way of telling a stroke story and then the other side and as you can see, I overuse words. So I struggle to do that. And this just does it so well. And it's a combination of all the people that worked on it.

Bill 1:10:11

And I think your conversations with can we make that, you know, sound effect just a little bit later or a little bit earlier, those conversations were well worth having. Because it's not maybe something that the that the amateur like me is going to pick up.

Bill 1:10:32

But the fact that the only thing that I'm getting out of that is the story. And the whole thing is just the whole sweet transition from one phase to the next means that it's just been done flawlessly, really.

Bill 1:10:45

And I hope that it actually gets to do the live shows, because that'll be next level. That'll be another experience altogether. Now, with COVID, sort of coming to this different phase, is it possible? Is it looking like it's going to be available in a theater?

Michael 1:11:10

I'm going to say optimistic, cautiously optimistic, Lee, yes, we're talking about it. We're discussing this coming may so that way we can still tie it in with National Stroke Awareness Month. They originally wanted me to do it in September, which is now like, that's, that's too soon. Like, I'm, I'm personally not ready to be in a theater yet.

Michael 1:11:35

Especially with the new variants coming out. But hopefully, my may like things will have calmed down a little bit. And we can we can gather again. And we'll get to do this. We have it's, I'm itching to do it. I actually watched the videotape of the the workshop last night.

Michael 1:11:58

Just in preparation for this. I was like, I'd forgotten how fun it was like they're like, you know, I don't think you go into a show about a stroke expecting it to be funny. And there's lots of I like to disarm people with humor. And and I had sort of forgotten about that. I was like, Oh, yes, it's not just like, oh, poor me, I had a stroke. There's, actually a lot of comedy in it which it was fun listening to the laughter lastly.

Bill 1:12:29

Yeah, that I like what you just said there about fun. His stroke isn't always fun. Like, there's a lot of hard yards in that. Does that fun helped make the recovery better, does it? Because you've been on this journey to develop this product, or this show for a while now. Like in that time, was it fun the whole time? Was it hard? What was it like to experience doing? Trying to develop this? Did you have doubts? What was it like?

Michael 1:12:59

Oh, yeah, oh, tons. Um, it's weird. Like, there were times I was completely overwhelmed. And then there were times where I like, it would be like a light bulb moment, or like, the sun would shine like, it's gonna go back to something we were talking about before about, like, finding purpose.

Michael 1:13:19

But writing the show, like physically writing the show, I had completely lost use of my left arm and left hand. And I was told that I probably wouldn't get it back. And as soon as they said that, I was like, No, I'm going to. So I started typing, because at first I was writing everything longhand with my right hand because I couldn't use my left hand.

Michael 1:13:36

I was like, like, put the pen down. Like I'm not gonna write longhand anymore. I'm gonna force myself to type. And I started typing like just five minutes a day where I had to literally like, take my right hand and move the fingers on my left hand to the keys. And after five minutes, I would need to take a two hour nap.

Michael 1:13:53

And then but I did that for a couple of weeks, and I built up to 10 minutes, then do that for a couple of weeks that I built, up to 15 minutes, and then finally got to where I was typing an hour a day. And now I've got both hands all from writing these stories. The other thing I did was it, like I said before, it unlocked a lot of my memory.

Check In With Your Five Senses

Michael 1:14:10

I lost so much memory and just writing these stories. It was like opening Pandora's box, almost like it was like, Oh, I forgot about that. And I forgot about

that. Because I had a good friend who was an incredible playwright recommend to me so whenever you get stuck writing something check in with your five senses.

Michael 1:14:29

Say what can I see? What can I hear? What can I taste? What can I touch? What can I smell? And I don't know if you look back you'll notice there like probably three or four different parts of the show where I actually do that I go through the five senses where I have the second stroke in the car and I think I've died.

Michael 1:14:49

I think I'm actually dead. I went wait. I can't be dead I can touch the steering wheel can touch the window. I can taste the tears coming down my face like I went through all the five senses and then I do Again, when I come out of the the anesthesia, like, what do I see? What do we do? So that like, just that little exercise would start unlocking things for me.

Bill 1:15:12

love that. I love that the other senses because your memory is one of the senses, like it's one part of you. But the physical feeling, and the emotional feeling might still be there. And the feeling in your gut about that experience might be there recruiting those. I love how they support bringing back that memory, like think about people that have Alzheimers that we hear about all the time, who sit in the chair all day at the nursing home, they don't do anything, they don't move.

Bill 1:15:42

And then all of a sudden, they hear a piece of music, and they're up on their feet dancing. Okay, so this is what we're doing. We're recruiting all these different senses. So there's a great tip for somebody who's having some memory challenges, maybe. Maybe they can ask somebody to prompt them in that way. Or maybe they can ask themselves those questions about what was I feeling at the time, rather than what did I just say? or whatever?

Michael 1:16:10

It's interesting what we just said, What were they feeling at that time, because the other thing that it did for me, the writing, it was really healing. Emotionally, because it's I was talking to a friend of mine one day, I'll never forget this. He was talking about the experience of having my parents lived with me after the stroke and, and he said to me goes, were you allowed to have your feelings at that time?

And I went, Oh, no, I wasn't.

Michael 1:16:42

And all of a sudden, like, when I started writing, I started telling the truth about what I was feeling about things. And that was the first time that stuff was coming out. And it was I remember someone asking me if it was hard to relive this experience on stage. And I said, No, it wasn't because I relived everything when I was writing it. Like that's, that's when that's when I really dug back in to what was going on. It wasn't just the, the physical stuff that was happening, it was the emotional stuff.

Michael 1:17:14

And there was a lot of emotion in there that I didn't know how to express and I mean, even, you know, my, my regulatory functions is that what they're called, like, the, the part of your brain that regulates your emotions, that was all out of whack. So like, I was all over the place, but actually, like stopping and getting present, like, how did I really feel at this time, like that, that got a lot deeper.

Michael 1:17:40

And I was actually able to, sort of heal through some of that by writing this. So the writing became physically like it became physical therapy, became occupational therapy became emotional therapy. It was, it was one of the greatest things. I yeah, it was, uh, I'm really glad I did it. Let me put it that way. It's funny, what one of the one of the things that happened to me, and I'm sure, I was not sure I don't know if you've experienced something like this.

Michael 1:18:16

But, after the stroke, I started getting identified as you know, a stroke survivor or stroke patient. I even had one of my doctors come in, and I was in a teaching hospital. And he came in with a whole gaggle of students behind him. They went here is the stroke guy, I went the stroke guy? Are you kidding me? And I'm like, and that was, when I said that this all goes back, everything goes back to choice. I refused in that moment, I was like, I will never be defined by my stroke.

Michael 1:18:51

Instead, I'm going to use the stroke as an opportunity to redefine myself. And I clearly, you know, what was before was fine. I'm on a different path now. And that's all been through the writing like my whole life. I supported other writers

and telling their stories, I produce their plays, I directed their plays, I acted in their plays, I help tell their stories.

Michael 1:19:17

And now I'm like, you know, what, back to what my teacher in grad school said, Now it's time for me to tell one of my own and luckily, I have 30 years of experience of helping other people do theirs, that I know how to do it. And, it's been it's been an incredible experience.

Bill 1:19:36

Yeah. And it's a story worth telling, because there's 30 years of experience and depth, to your knowledge to your understanding. I imagine you feel a little bit easier now telling your story now, because early on, like you said at 25 you didn't have a story, which is not true. You really did have a story even at 25.

Michael 1:19:54

Well, I should clarify say I didn't have a story that I was ready to tell or willing to tell at 25.

Bill 1:20:00

Yeah, yeah, which is fine, right? And that's probably everybody. And well, that's a lot of people. And there's some people who feel like they do have a story of at 25. Because that story relates to the people that are 25 and younger. And that's what it's about. It's really about relating. So we get to this age, and we think about, like, I've got more years, and therefore I probably relate to more people. It's like, well, that's not it anymore.

Bill 1:20:31

You've overcome your fear story, you've overcome your self doubt story, you've overcome all that stuff. And basically, now it's like, well, I nearly wasn't here. So everything from here for me, this is me list is everything from here on is a bonus. So in this bonus, period, I'm doing whatever the heck I want. And I'm not really gonna care what anybody else thinks, I'm just gonna do it for me, whether they like it or not, is irrelevant.

Bill 1:20:58

If they like it, it's a bonus that they liked it and it helped them. But I'm doing it for me, I had a similar kind of feeling about the book writing a book, people told me, you should put this in a book Bill. And I'm like, Okay, well, Bill had a stroke. The

End, big deal. Like, who wants to hear about me, having a stroke, there's so many people that have had a stroke, it doesn't mean anything, you have to make the story relevant.

Bill 1:21:29

And it has to be, too, like you've you've said, You've picked your avatar, and you've got to speak to your avatar. And for me, my story in my book is going to be, there's going to be that much in it about me like nothing. And the reason is, because it's not what uh, it's not what happened to me, it's about what I learned and what I discovered, and therefore, what might help other people who have a stroke, discover about themselves and learn about themselves, and then hopefully help them heal. That's a better story, then, Bill, you start a story based stroke.

Bill 1:22:03

That's a way better story. And I feel like your story does that he gives a lived experience of what it's like to go through an experience stroke gives a lived experience of what's happening in the aftermath of that, and how you get through it, and how you overcome it. And what the aha moment was at the end.

Bill 1:22:28

You know, so that is the one that I relate to, and I get sucked in on but whoever is listening on here, you're not going to find out unless you jump on Spotify, and do the search for A Lesson In Swimming. It's free, download it, listen to it, you'll love it and leave some feedback, get in touch with Michael on Instagram, and I'll have some of your links, Michael, for people to get in touch with you.

Bill 1:22:56

Let him know what you thought of it. And also give it a review. If you can on podcast or wherever you listen to your your podcasts, because the more views it gets, the better it will. It will be found by other stroke survivors who really need this sort of stories. they they they really need this because it offers hope. You know, it really does.

Bill 1:23:21

I have thoroughly enjoyed getting to meet you on our previous chat offline. And then expand my appreciation for you in this episode. So thank you so much for being on the podcast.

Michael 1:23:38

Thank you so much for having me.

Bill 1:23:39

My pleasure, mate. My absolute pleasure. Just before we wrap up, where would people find you and get in touch with you online?

Michael 1:23:52

Well, I'm on Instagram, as @whmike, then alesund swimming also has its own Instagram page. So it's just a lesson in swimming. And then my website is www.michaelshutt.com. And on my website, there's a contact place where you can email me directly. And you can also find the radio show is actually on the website as well. If you don't have Spotify, although I don't know who doesn't have Spotify. But you can listen to it directly on the website if you'd like.

Bill 1:24:33

Thanks for being on the podcast.

Michael 1:24:35

Thank you so much for having me. This has been awesome.

Bill 1:24:37

Thanks so much for joining me on today's recovery after stroke podcast. You ever wish there was just one place to go for resources, advice and support in your stroke recovery? Whether you've been navigating your journey for weeks, months or years, I know firsthand how difficult it can be to get the answers you need.

Bill 1:24:55

This road is both physically and mentally challenging from reclaiming your independence together. Getting back to work to rebuilding your confidence and more. The symptoms don't follow a rulebook and as soon as you leave the hospital, you no longer have medical professionals on tap.

Bill 1:25:09

I know for me It felt as if I was teaching myself a new language from scratch with no native speaker in sight. If this sounds like you, I'm here to tell you that you're not alone. And there's a better way to navigate your recovery and rebuild a fulfilling life that you love. I've created an inclusive, supportive and accessible membership community called recovery after stroke.

Bill 1:25:30

This only one support and resource program is designed to help you take your health into your own hands. This is your guide walk through every step in your journey from reducing fatigue to strengthening your brain health, to overcoming anxiety and more. To find out more and to join the community. Just head to recoveryafterstroke.com See you next time.

Intro 1:25:50

Importantly, we present many podcasts designed to give you an insight and understanding into the experiences of other individuals opinions and treatment protocols discussed during any podcast are the individual's own experience and we do not necessarily share the same opinion nor do we recommend any treatment protocol discussed.

Intro 1:26:07

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Intro 1:26:30

The information is general and may not be suitable for your personal injuries, circumstances or health objectives. Do not use our content as a standalone resource to diagnose treat, cure or prevent any disease for therapeutic purposes or as a substitute for the advice of a health professional. Never delay seeking advice or disregard the advice of a medical professional your doctor or your rehabilitation program based on our content.

Intro 1:26:52

If you have any questions or concerns about your health or medical condition please seek guidance from a doctor or other medical professional if you are experiencing a health emergency or think you might be called triple zero in Australia or your local emergency number immediately for emergency assistance for Go to the nearest hospital emergency department medical information changes constantly.

Intro 1:27:12

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