

LIFESTYLE

RIVER FALLS

'MY LIFE FLIPPED OVER'

Seventh grader rebuilds life after stroke

BY JIM JOHNSON
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Ryan Sharon has been through a lot in the past year and a half.

Much more than any seventh grader should endure.

There was a stroke, restoring her body through physical therapy and returning to school.

Yet Ryan – known as RJ to her family and friends – found time to celebrate the one-year anniversary of her stroke and at the same time raise nearly \$5,000 for the River Falls High School group that showed her kindness during her recovery.

The stroke

"It was Oct. 20, 2020, ... that was when my life flipped over," RJ said. "It completely changed my perspective of the world, you could say."

She remembers it all.

She had been feeling tired for a couple of days and had felt sick at school the day before. The first thought was COVID-19, and RJ was tested.

She was at home, waiting for the test results. It was a Tuesday.

"I woke up that morning, and I was extremely tired," RJ said. "Like the day before I was in school, and I felt kind of sick."

That was when she took the COVID-19 test.

"In reality, that was the start of a stroke," she said.

She felt bad all day that Tuesday.

"In the morning, I sat down on the living room couch, and I could not move my legs," RJ said. "I thought my legs were just tired."

It was around 6 p.m. when the stroke hit.

"In my mom's words, the world, like, stopped."

"All of a sudden, I slid out of the chair," RJ recalled. "I was unable to move my legs. I wasn't able to move my right arm, and I was barely able to move my left hand. I couldn't see at all, and I was having trouble breathing."

"I thought, like, I was not going to survive."

Her dad rushed her to the emergency room in River Falls. Tests showed an abnormality in RJ's head, and she was taken to Children's Hospital in St. Paul.

Tangle of blood vessels

More tests determined RJ had a growth on her brain. It was not until surgery that doctors determined it was arteriovenous malformation, a tangle of blood vessels connecting arteries and veins on her brain. Her doctor said she was probably born with it.

RJ learned all about AVMs, the condition that caused her stroke, in the following months.

The Mayo Clinic describes the condition:

An arteriovenous malformation (AVM) is an abnormal tangle of blood vessels connecting arteries and veins, which disrupts normal blood flow and oxygen circulation.

Arteries are responsible for taking oxygen-rich blood from the heart to the brain. Veins carry the oxygen-depleted blood back to the lungs and heart.

When an AVM disrupts this critical process, the surrounding tissues may not get enough oxygen. Also, because the tangled blood vessels that form the AVM are abnormal, they can weaken and rupture. If the AVM is in the brain and ruptures, it can cause bleeding in the brain (hemorrhage), stroke or brain damage. The cause of AVMs is not clear. They're rarely passed down among families.

Once diagnosed, a brain AVM can often be treated successfully to prevent or reduce the risk of complications.

That's scary stuff for an 11-year-old.

The good news. Doctors determined RJ did not need



"I thought, like, I was not going to survive."

Ryan "RJ" Sharon,
River Falls
seventh grader

JIM JOHNSON/STAR-OBSERVER

Meyer Middle School seventh grader Ryan Sharon. "I would still love to play hockey," she says.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Presenting a check for \$4,982 for the Sunshine Fund are, front row from left, Olivia Pizzi, Sophy Haydon, Ryan Sharon, Madisyn Clay, Morgan Prigge, Kinsley Albores and Cheyanne Wilson. Back row, Gary Campbell, Colleen Jahnke, Evan Luedtke, Scott Morrisette and Kerri Olson.

emergency surgery. By the first part of November, she was able to go home and wait for the surgery. She started physical therapy while in the hospital, which is still ongoing today.

An entry on the Caring Bridge website, which kept friends apprised of her condition, describes some of the early progress.

It started with her leg movements, then her ankle was able to flex, and then she was able to scrunch her toes together. ...

Over the weekend, the muscles in her face started to move. She was able to fully smile again.

She had some redness/hotness in the right side of her face but that has started to subside.

It's been tough work for RJ getting her body working again.

"It was pretty quick to get my walking back, and my left hand movement back," RJ said. "The hardest part was trying to get my right hand movement back."

Surgery was scheduled for Dec. 2 but was rescheduled

after RJ got sick – not COVID-19 but sick enough to push surgery off for a week. Doctors did perform a procedure on Dec. 2 to see if a simple stent would solve the problem without doing a craniotomy.

"They wanted to do one final test to make sure it wasn't just a lesion that could simply be stented," RJ's mom, Kristi, said. "It was not. It was still a tangled mess in there."

RJ doesn't remember much from the day of the surgery or any of the following days including her 12th birthday on Dec. 15.

The surgery took 12 hours as doctors removed the twisted mess of blood vessels that caused her stroke.

Sunshine Fund

RJ returned home on Christmas Eve and celebrated with her family.

It was a week or two later that a group of River Falls High students, called the

Sunshine Fund, delivered a package to cheer up RJ. It contained some basics – a blanket, a bag, hand sanitizer and some other things.

RJ had never heard of the Sunshine Fund.

"They just did that out of kindness," she said.

When the one-year anniversary of the stroke rolled around, RJ decided to have a celebration. It was part AVM awareness party, part fundraiser.

T-shirts were made that said, "Ryan is an AVM warrior" and "AVM is not for the weak."

When the event was over, it had generated \$4,982 for the Sunshine Fund.

Back to school

RJ returned to Meyer Middle School at the beginning of the school year. Her first day as a seventh grader went great.

The second and third days did not go as well.

"All of a sudden I lost my vision again, and everywhere just became black," she said.

An ambulance came and took her to the emergency room again. Doctors found nothing wrong.

The diagnosis was RJ's body was tired. She was cleared to return to school, but the third day went similarly to the second.

"The next day I almost went to the emergency room again, so we decided to only go to half days of school because my body can't handle full days," she said.

Now she takes three classes, math, science and language arts. And there are stares in the hallways from other students.

"A lot of people just looked at me that I was weird, and at first it didn't (bother) me, but now as I'm walking through the hallways, I just see a bunch of people just staring at my braces," RJ said. "Sometimes I can see that they're judging me – just in their eyes – and that really hurts my feelings, but no one says anything to my face."

She added: "Everybody just thinks of me as a different person."

Hockey, babysitting

RJ is not a different person. She longs to be back on the ice playing hockey with her friends.

"I played hockey, and I would still love to play hockey," she said, her voice building with excitement. "That's one of my goals to get back into playing hockey."

"I just love skating, and I love being aggressive, so hockey was the perfect sport," she said. "Plus my family loves hockey."

Her hockey team was supportive during her rehabilitation. RJ went to a game in November. It was strange watching from the stands and not being on the ice. Her teammates had purple stickers on their helmets, "We skate the fight for RJ."

After her surgery, those teammates came to her home to cheer her up.

RJ's mom, Kristi, continues to be haunted by the harrowing experience – the fears, the uncertainty – feeling helpless watching her daughter lie in a hospital bed.

RJ is now her inspiration.

"I still don't sleep well; those days still haunt my thoughts," Kristi said. "But everything she has endured has made her such an incredible young woman."

"I am far beyond proud of her and seeing her thrive," Kristi continued. "She is my inspiration and is the strongest person I know."

The recovery is taking longer than expected. Still RJ "has welcomed the new her," her mom said.

"She is ready to fight again, to get back to running, using her right hand again and to just be a kid again," Kristi said.

Part of being a kid is babysitting.

RJ had planned to take babysitting lessons that were canceled in 2020 due to COVID-19. She is hoping to take the class soon and begin babysitting.

She loves children, and babysitting would be a way of earning money and working with children. Her recovery experience has fueled dreams, too.

For the past year and a half, physical therapists have been a big part of RJ's life. They taught her about muscles and joints and how the human body works.

"My dream job used to be a vet, and now it's a physical therapist," RJ said. "I really want to be a physical therapist for kids."

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