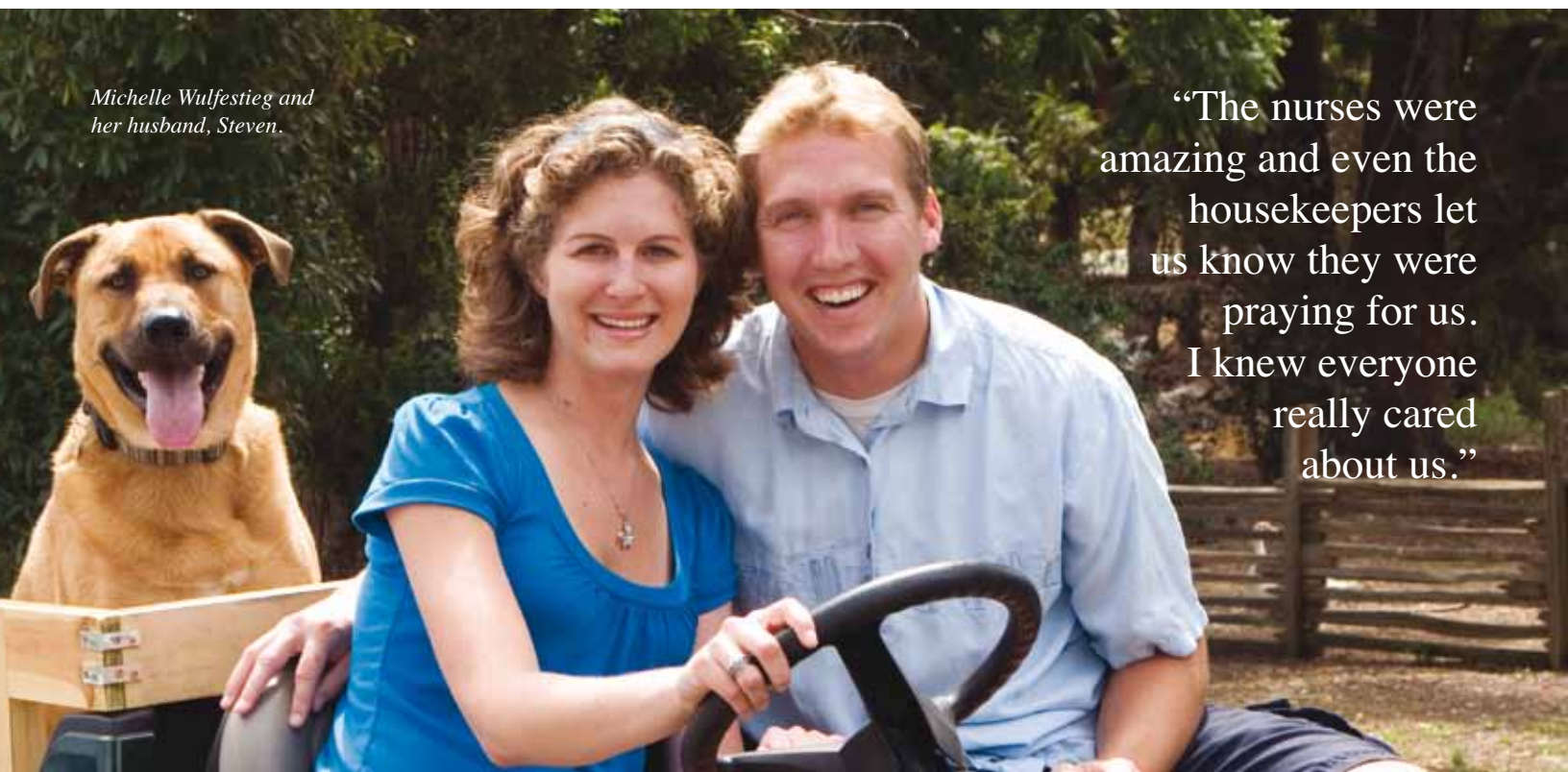


Michelle Wulfestieg and her husband, Steven.



“The nurses were amazing and even the housekeepers let us know they were praying for us. I knew everyone really cared about us.”

Faith, Hope and Hoag

Hoag neurosurgeon removes ‘inoperable’ brain lesion to save a young stroke patient

When Michelle Wulfestieg counts her blessings every day, chief among them is Hoag Hospital. Her incredible story began nearly 20 years ago, long before she came under the care of the gifted physicians at Hoag.

Raised in Anza, CA, a small community situated in the mountains near Idyllwild, she was a typical 10-year old in 1993 when she began experiencing severe headaches. Tests revealed she had suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and that she had a large pulsating mass of tangled blood vessels and arteries in her brain, known as an arteriovenous malformation (AVM). She had suffered a massive stroke.

Michelle, now 25, was told that the sausage-shaped lesion was protruding deep into her brain. Due to its size and precarious location, her previous doctors decided surgery was too dangerous. Instead, they recommended she undergo radiation treatment to shrink the AVM which it did. However, it also damaged the motor strip on the left side of her brain, causing permanent paralysis on

the right side.

“After the radiation treatment, a sizeable portion of the AVM remained lodged in my brain,” says Michelle. “My neurosurgeon from another facility at the time sent me home, saying, ‘Just live every day to the fullest.’ That’s exactly what I decided to do.”

Michelle graduated from Hamilton High School in Anza and California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks, where she earned a BS degree in psychology. She met her future husband, Steven, shortly before graduating in 2004, married him in 2005, and embarked upon a career. Then, while completing her master’s thesis one evening in January 2008, her old nemesis revisited her.

A Second Stroke

“The night I finished my thesis was the night I had my second stroke,” Michelle says, adding, “Somehow I knew I had to finish it. I wrote the last paragraph, then took it down to a print shop. All of a sudden the room began spinning.”

After arriving at home she lay down on the couch and began drifting in and out of consciousness. Thinking fast, Steven drove Michelle to a fire station near their home. There, paramedics stabilized her and whisked her off to nearby Hoag Hospital Emergency Department (ED). Staff there acted quickly. A CT scan confirmed that Michelle had suffered another stroke.

“The doctors told Steven that if they didn’t surgically remove the AVM, I wouldn’t make it through the night,” Michelle says. “If I did have the surgery, the chance of survival would be 50/50.”

Not liking those odds, Steven consented to his wife’s surgery, which began almost immediately and lasted 5-½ hours. During surgery Hoag neurosurgeons gingerly delved into her brain and removed the AVM without complication. Following surgery they induced a coma to allow her brain to rest and eight days later she awoke in a daze.

A ‘Miracle’ Recovery

“The miracle of healing that I’d been praying for all my life happened when I woke up from the coma,” she says. “I felt an overwhelming sense of peace. I wasn’t frightened, I felt no pain, and best of all the once-inoperable AVM was gone.”

In addition to Hoag’s expertly trained and fast-acting ED staff, Steven credits William R. Dobkin, M.D., the neurosurgeon who performed brain surgery on Michelle, with saving her life.

“He was outstanding,” Steven says. “Not only is he a great surgeon, but he came in every day to update and encourage us. I don’t think Michelle would be here today if it weren’t for the people in the ER, Dr. Dobkin and the entire Hoag staff.”

Learning to Live Again

“After I awoke from the coma I was like a toddler,” Michelle shares. “I had to relearn how to do almost everything all over again—including walking, talking and eating.”

It took months of difficult physical, occupational and speech therapy at Hoag but today Michelle is back at work as the Executive Director of the Southern California Hospice Foundation in Garden Grove. She and Steven are forever grateful to Hoag for that gift—and for the gift of her life.

“Everyone from the home health aids on up were doing much more than what their jobs required them to do,” she says. “The nurses were amazing and even the housekeepers let us know they were praying for us. I knew everyone really cared about us.

“I can honestly say I wouldn’t be here today if it weren’t for the incredibly talented staff at Hoag, who literally saved my life,” she adds. “Hoag is the best hospital in the world as far as I am concerned.” ■

Dedicated Neurosciences Unit Coming To Hoag

Plans are underway to consolidate all of neurosciences patient care to the 9th floor of the West Tower of Hoag Hospital in the Newport Beach location. Currently a dedicated Stroke Center is housed in the Women’s Pavilion and patients with other brain disorders and injuries are cared for on various other floors of the hospital.

Slated for opening in late 2010 or early 2011, the dedicated Hoag Neurosciences Unit will allow nurses, physicians and other health care providers to concentrate solely on caring for those with stroke, epilepsy, Parkinson’s disease, and other neurological conditions, in one specially equipped area.

“Having a dedicated neurosciences floor will allow nurses, therapists, and other care givers to specialize in these types of patients and gain a deep level of knowledge about their conditions, and best coordinated management practices,” says Michael Brant-Zawadzki, M.D., F.A.C.R. executive medical director of Hoag Neurosciences. “It also facilitates communication and collaboration among neurologists, neurosurgeons, and other physicians as they converge on the unit to care for their patients.”

The unit will include equipment and technology for patient monitoring for seizures and vital signs, and special portals for bedside EEG testing and monitoring. “Consolidating neurological care in one unit will take Hoag Neurosciences to the appropriate level in providing the best care possible to our community,” says Dori Holnagel, executive operations director, Hoag Neurosciences. “This is a wonderful opportunity for someone in the community to step in and assist us in making it a world-class healing unit.”

If you would like information on naming opportunities or to learn more about how you can support Hoag Neurosciences Institute, please contact Kenya Beckmann at (949) 764-6384 or Kenya.Beckmann@hoaghospital.org.