

Patient Stories, continued

The Gastroparesis and Dysmotilities Association
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Calgary, AB

The Important Things in Life:

HURRICANE KATRINA...

A name that will never be forgotten, a storm so devastating that it destroyed New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast in just a few short hours. This storm has affected the lives of all of us, but some more so than others. One such family is also one of “us”, a family that has been devastated by the debilitating effects of gastroparesis.

Albert, 43, has been a Type I diabetic for twenty-two years, and has worn an insulin pump since 1998. Seven years ago, after suffering from severe bouts of nausea and vomiting, he was finally diagnosed with gastroparesis. Albert endured frequent hospitalizations. His physicians prescribed all the available medications and utilized all treatment options, all without successfully controlling his symptoms. But all this changed in May 2005, when he was implanted with his gastric electrical stimulator (Enterra Therapy, aka stomach pacer) at the University of Mississippi Medical Center (UMMC) in Jackson.

Albert immediately experienced a positive change in his gastroparesis symptoms. Three months later, when he returned to UMMC for his follow-up gastric-emptying test and EGG, he was no longer experiencing severe nausea and vomiting; but best of all, he did not require any adjustments to his pacer. It seemed, at last, that this family could begin to get their lives back to some semblance of normalcy.

But then Hurricane Katrina struck on August 29, 2005. Albert, his wife and daughter were a few of the lucky ones that escaped with their lives. However, their home sustained major damage and a portion of their lives was forever lost. The material possessions can be replaced, but happy memories are all that they have left of a home they shared for twelve years.

After the wind and rain subsided, family and friends worked tirelessly to restore what was left. Albert and Angie's only child a beautiful, 14-year-old daughter named Terri worked alongside her disabled father, being the strongest of the strong and never once complaining.

On the Tuesday afternoon following the hurricane, after three exhaustive days, Terri came in and simply said, “Mommy, I don't feel good”. She was given some Tylenol and told to lie down and rest awhile. Later that evening, Terri started vomiting, but she was still only complaining of “not feeling good”. This would soon change as daybreak of the following day approached and the sun cast a bright light on the devastation around them. Terri started vomiting more often and was now experiencing intense abdominal pain. The area hospitals had been severely damaged; and unsure if their local doctors were even

alive, Albert and Angie drove their daughter to a makeshift medical clinic that had been established at one of the local high schools by incoming volunteers. After a one-hour wait, Terri was evaluated by a FEMA pediatric physician from California. His tentative diagnosis: appendicitis. Terri was then transferred to Garden Park Hospital where she waited for ten hours before being air-lifted by helicopter to UMMC in Jackson, Mississippi. Her father accompanied her on the flight. ER physicians could not confirm appendicitis, but upon admission to hospital, more tests were ordered for the morning.

Angie arrived by vehicle several hours later, around 11:00 pm, accompanied by her elderly mother. Her 175-mile trip was hampered by road closures and a shortage of gasoline. The rest of the night was spent in Terri's hospital room, with Grandmother sleeping on the chair-bed, and Albert and Angie on the cold, hard floor. All were too afraid to leave Terri's bedside.

Thursday morning started with a buzz of activity, all the while with few complaints from Terri. Finally, it was time for more tests and surgery. At 4:00 pm, this courageous, young girl was taken to the OR, and returned to her parents' loving embrace four hours later. Surgeons had been correct with the diagnosis of appendicitis, but with one BIG complication. Her appendix had ruptured probably four days previously on the day that Hurricane Katrina attacked. Pus had covered just about everything inside her abdominal cavity.

The family was told Terri was facing an extensive hospitalization with intensive IV antibiotics and would possibly be discharged home with this regimen.

Albert and Angie support GPDA's mission and have distributed numerous quantities of our informational materials. Even when Terri was being treated in the field facilities, surrounded by death and destruction, this family still took the opportunity to talk with the California FEMA physician about gastroparesis and our desperate need for awareness, education, and better treatment options. Albert has volunteered to be our Southern District Representative covering the Mississippi Gulf Coast and surrounding areas.

Two weeks later, Terri received a clean bill of health from her surgeon with the only restriction being that she cannot resume her baton twirling until November. She is currently home-schooled because of the hurricane damage.

It is with bittersweet tears of happiness that this amazing story has ended. Terri has completely recovered from her surgery. Albert's gastroparesis remains stable. The debris and uprooted trees have been cleared away. The areas damaged by the hurricane have begun to rebuild what was lost. And yes, we do still see a rainbow at the end of every storm.