

# Observer & Eccentric

(15 Editions)

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## Without words

### Stroke patient learns to speak again

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Philip Gach renewed his driver's license last July. It might not seem like a major accomplishment, but for Gach it meant everything just to be able to answer the examiner's questions.

More than a year earlier, a stroke had left the 68-year-old Birmingham resident unable to communicate. Gach had been talking on the phone at work when all of a sudden he couldn't hear. A friend drove him to Henry Ford Medical Center in West Bloomfield where they transferred him to Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak. About a half an hour after his wife, Shirley, arrived, Gach couldn't speak.

"He looked at me with great fright in his eyes," said Shirley Gach, who was at her husband's side through 40 days in intensive care, seven surgeries and two bacterial infections. Gach finally came home in a wheelchair in Nov. 20, 2003, with a permanent shunt to relieve fluid on his brain. Gach doesn't remember anything for the seven months following his stroke and relies on his wife to tell the story of what he went through to be able to communicate again.

"More than a month after his surgery, a speech therapist evaluated him," said Shirley. "He was barely responsive at that point. She was asking him to make vowel sounds without success, but he could sing. Speaking was another thing even though he understood commands to squeeze your hand."

Gach attended therapy sessions. On weekends, they went home to save on costs. The program cost \$24,000 and was not covered by insurance. "It was just like going to school with individual and group therapy, music therapy.

#### GETTING HELP

Shirley didn't know where to look for help for the aphasia, a language impairment caused by stroke, brain injury or cancer. A family member went on the Internet and found the University of Michigan Residential Aphasia Program. Within a month, Gach's communication skills were being evaluated by the Ann Arbor staff.

Established in 1947 to assist World War II veterans who'd sustained brain injuries in combat, RAP designs individualized therapy programs that vary in length. Three months of speech therapy at Beaumont helped Gach to speak in sentences, read and write but he still had a long way to go. Aphasia affects patients differently depending on the severity of brain damage. Some are unable to comprehend words, others can't speak, read or write.

Four months after determining his communication level, Gach and Shirley checked into a hotel in Ann Arbor. Five days a week for six weeks,

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We even had homework every night," said Gach, who kept a journal of his challenges on computer. He hopes to eventually return to work. Two years before the stroke, he had been in Europe directing procurement operations for Lear Corp. At the time of the stroke, he was working as a purchasing manager for a Novi business.

### CHALLENGES

"It's being able to find the word. The biggest part is the words won't come. You can go around." Gach gestures as he struggles to find the appropriate words. RAP programs help clients regain skills and develop new ways of communicating when necessary.

"It's frustrating," said Gach. "You can see it but can't find it."

"It wasn't just speaking but comprehension, word retrieval," added Shirley. "Every week we went out to dinner on Wednesday night with the group so they could practice their communication skills."

"It's an extraordinary program. Phil's comprehension, sentence formulation improved. He was able to explain things better. He was having progression of thought and was able to follow directions. He was better at explaining because he was keeping a journal."

Shirley sat in on 90 percent of the sessions. Family members and caregivers are an important part of the program. The two still travel to Ann Arbor once a week to take part in the Language Enrichment Group. The ongoing program allows Gach to practice communication skills with patients from as far away as Fenton,

Lansing, Jackson, and Toledo.

### FAMILY MATTERS

"The program is also for caregivers," said Joanne Pierson, associate director of RAP. "We want to help spouses learn new ways of communication. We do conversational coaching to understand you may need to speak more slowly, rephrase a question, give them time to respond."

"We're such a verbal society. They need to learn other ways whether it's a pocket communicator to point to what they need, learning to have a pencil and paper so they can draw. We teach them to use gestures, to signal dialing a phone."

In Gach's case, singing brought much success.

"There are clients who can't say anything but can sing songs. The music helps them to get their words out," said Mimi Block, head of clinical services. "Success with music therapy is common for people with aphasia. Singing enables them to say words or phrases."

For more information, call (734) 764-8440 or visit [www.aphasiahelp.com](http://www.aphasiahelp.com).

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