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A storm-chaser's greatest danger

Weather-watcher Scott McPartland has been through some of nature's most challenging events, but it was his own body that almost took him down



Scott McPartland has been fascinated by storms since he was 13, watching lightning fill the sky one afternoon outside his Queens home. He headed to the local library to learn more about the weather and started saving for a video camera. By 1999 he'd begun traveling the United States, following and filming storms.

In 2005, during Hurricane Katrina, he experienced a 28-foot storm surge in Gulf Port, Mississippi. In 2013, he drove through the heavy winds of a 2.6-mile-wide tornado that bore down on El Reno, Oklahoma — a storm that, sadly, killed several of McPartland's storm-chasing colleagues.

McPartland respected the damage storms could do and felt for the people whose lives were upended, but he fearlessly immersed himself in nature's intensity. He never expected his greatest danger to come from his own body — or to need the help of doctors at two hospitals to survive.

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

In May 2022, McPartland was vacuuming his living room in his Rego Park, Queens home when he collapsed without warning. He didn't know what was happening, but he knew it was serious. "I thought, 'I got 49 years, and this is it,'" he says now. He would have said it at the time, but he'd lost his ability to speak.

One of McPartland's videorecorders shows him lying on the floor. Then he pulled himself up and stumbled toward the door, determined to find his wife, Cecelia Morgan, who was working in her home office. Alarmed by his garbled speech, Morgan called McPartland's sister and brother-in-law, both nurses, who lived two doors away. Call 911, they said. It sounds like a stroke.

Morgan, a specialist for 511NY Rideshare, a statewide transportation program, had always trusted her



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husband to keep himself safe when he was out storm-chasing, but this felt different. “This was out of his control,” she says. “It was like a natural disaster was happening to him.”

A RACE AGAINST TIME

Paramedics arrived quickly and used TeleStroke, a remote video consultation tool, to connect with

neurologist Gaurav Kapoor, DO, at Long Island Jewish (LIJ) Forest Hills. After consulting with Rohan Arora, MD, director of the hospital's stroke program, Dr. Kapoor came back with an urgent message: McPartland needed a CT scan. If that test ruled out a brain bleed, he should get a clot-buster medication called tissue plasminogen activator, or tPA. And he



needed all that as fast as possible — the moment he arrived at LIJ Forest Hills. A stroke restricts oxygen to the brain, and every minute means the death of two million brain cells.

McPartland got the tPA, but an imaging test showed that a blockage remained in his brain, cutting off blood flow in a major vessel. Clots that size sometimes need to be physically removed with a procedure called a thrombectomy: A specialist threads a narrow tube called a catheter through blood vessels all the way to the brain, then uses a tiny, net-like device to capture the clot. “It’s like grabbing a cork in a bottle and pulling it out,” Dr. Arora says.

A thrombectomy must be performed within 24 hours of the first symptoms of stroke. So, just in case he needed one, McPartland’s team decided to transfer him to North Shore University Hospital’s (NSUH) Interventional Stroke Center. They kept their eyes on the clock: The stroke felled McPartland in his home at 3:45 pm. Before 5 pm, he was in the ambulance speeding toward NSUH.

“I remember the ambulance drove on the shoulder of the Long Island Expressway,” McPartland says. Though the clinical team had given

SIGNS THAT MAY MEAN STROKE

Even people who are younger or who exercise and eat right can be at risk for a stroke, says Rohan Arora, MD, director of LIJ Forest Hills’s stroke program — so everyone should know the signs. These changes mean you should act **FAST** to get care:

- F** one-sided facial drooping or numbness
- A** arm weakness
- S** speech difficulty or slurring
- T** time to call 911

him periodic explanations as they worked, he wasn’t sure of what was happening to him. He had a theory, though. He’d been experiencing a fair amount of stress while caring for elderly relatives and sometimes couldn’t sleep; he also dabbled in day trading. He thought he might be having a panic attack about the stock market.

“They kept asking me my name and the date,” he says. “I tried to explain that I had been vacuuming, and I thought I had fallen and had an anxiety attack, but I couldn’t speak.” He had moments of clarity during which he could blurt out short answers to questions. Then he’d lose the ability to speak again.

SUDDEN STROKE, HIDDEN CAUSE

At NSUH, another imaging test showed that the clot-busting meds had done their job — McPartland wouldn’t need a thrombectomy after all. Now the team had time to turn to a larger question: Why would a relatively young man in excellent physical shape have a stroke in the first place?

One of the tests speedily performed when McPartland first arrived at LIJ Forest Hills provided the answer. Doctors had done an echocardiogram

to check for cardiac damage, and the exam revealed that McPartland had a heart abnormality that had been present since birth: a patent foramen ovale (PFO), sometimes called a hole in the heart. There was a small flap-like opening between two upper chambers of the heart, and it was allowing blood to flow the wrong way.

“Everyone has a hole in the heart as a fetus,” says Avneet Singh, MD, director of interventional cardiology at LIJ Medical Center. Normally, the hole closes shortly after birth, but that doesn’t happen in about one in four babies. In most cases, a PFO doesn’t cause problems — but if a clot happens to form, the hole can allow it to travel straight to the brain.

The diagnosis came as a shock to McPartland. “I was freaked out,” he says. “I was thinking I would need open heart surgery and that I was at risk of dying again. But I was told no — it could be treated, and I could be home the same day.”

WATCHING A HEART GET FIXED IN REAL TIME

McPartland’s brain had been saved by the treatments he’d received within the “golden hour” after his stroke’s onset. His doctors gave him some time to recover before the procedure to close his PFO.

Three months later, he returned to the Sandra Atlas Bass Heart Hospital at NSUH. Open surgery wasn’t necessary. Instead, Dr. Singh performed the procedure laparoscopically, snaking a catheter through a small incision in McPartland’s groin through an artery all the way to the opening in the heart. There, the surgeon deployed a tiny, umbrella-like device called an Amplatzer PFO Occluder.

Dr. Singh opened the device to create a patch and pulled it snug

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against the PFO. Made of titanium, the device doesn’t degrade, Dr. Singh says; over time, as the body heals, tissue grows over it and essentially embeds it in place.

McPartland, who was sedated but awake for the procedure, watched the whole thing on a monitor. “I noticed my heart beating faster, and Dr. Singh said, ‘We are actually tickling your heart right now, and it’s responding.’ I was in awe. I watched them close the hole in my heart.”

Afterward, McPartland had to remain motionless on a table for several hours — not a particularly demanding recovery. “By 5:30 that night, I was having dinner at my father’s house,” he says. “Twenty or 30 years ago, this would have been full open-heart surgery. It astonishes me.”

Now fully recovered, McPartland is determined to protect his health. For six months after the stroke, he took a blood thinner to prevent further clots. He continues to take a cholesterol-lowering medication and baby aspirin. And he stays active, going to the gym four days a week and averaging 10,000 steps a day.

He does skip the gym now and then, though, in order to get back out on the

road, chasing storms. Last September, McPartland celebrated his 50th birthday by driving from New York to Gainesville, Florida with a storm-chasing buddy to film Hurricane Ian. It was four months after his stroke, and just six weeks after his surgery.

“It was completely surreal,” he says. “I went from having a stroke to spending my 50th birthday in a category 4 storm — the most intense storm I’d ever filmed.”

The experience taught McPartland to let go of worry and treasure the moment.

“I have been given a second chance and my belief system has shifted,” he said. “I still have my moments where I doubt myself, but now I try to seize every day and I try to pull something good out of it. Even if the day sucked, it was still a day I got to experience, and I try to be grateful for that.”



To learn more about treatment for stroke or make an appointment, scan the QR code or call 844-566-3876.