



Shermane Winters-Wofford – Stroke Survivor, 40

At first, Shermane Winters-Wofford thought it was first-date jitters. The young, single mom was at a nice restaurant with a guy she really liked. But while they waited for their table, Shermane's excitement turned into something more. She began to sweat. Tightness gripped her chest -- as if her heart was being squeezed. Embarrassed and a bit frightened, Shermane excused herself to splash some water on her face.

"When I was in the restroom trying to gather my thoughts, I was so scared," she says. "I was scared and anxious at the same time. I was completely ignorant to what was going on. I didn't understand it."

Shermane had always thought of herself as perfectly healthy. She had grown up an active child, and still felt energetic and strong as a young adult. It never even entered her mind that she was having a stroke.

When Shermane returned to her date, she realized with alarm that her vision was blurred and she was unable to lift her arm. Her date suggested they go to a hospital, but Shermane didn't want to be any trouble. She politely insisted that he take her home.

Once Shermane arrived home, she could no longer downplay her symptoms; they headed back out to the hospital. Scared and disoriented, Shermane was shocked when a nurse began to scold her.

"The nurse fussed at me for not taking my blood pressure medication," Shermane recalls. Though by this time Shermane was having trouble communicating, she managed to tell the nurse that not only was she not on medication, she had never had hypertension or high blood pressure in her life.

Tests confirmed that Shermane had, in fact, had a stroke. The woman who thought of herself as perfectly healthy learned that she had been at risk all along. Like many other African-Americans, she had strong family history of high blood pressure and heart disease. Unfortunately for Shermane, this wasn't something her family discussed until after her stroke.

After being released from the hospital, Shermane began eating better and exercising more. But she didn't truly commit to making healthy changes in her life until several years later -- when she suffered a second stroke.

This time, Shermane recognized the symptoms and got to the hospital right away. And now she's changed her life: eating right, exercising regularly and tracking her blood pressure every day.

Shermane is on a mission to stay healthy these days, because her life has changed in other ways as well.

"The guy who took me out on the date? A year later, since we didn't get to have dinner that night, he took me out to the same restaurant," she says. "Later that night, he proposed to me. And we've been married for seven years now."

Shermane intends to tell more than five women about the dangers of heart disease and the importance of knowing their cholesterol and blood pressure numbers and family history. But she's starting by making sure her four sisters and her two best friends know their personal risk.

"I Go Red," she says, "for all the women in my family."