

# Chicago Sun-Times

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Mary A. (Johnson) Mitchell

## Sick Mom Wants to Give Hope to Son and Others

**M**atthew's mom is special. Besides being funny, she's patient and she spends most of her time just looking after him. What 7-year-old boy wouldn't want a mom like that?

When Matthew's happy, his mom, Susan Filstead, is at her best. When he's sad, well...

In an effort to make life better for 7-year-old Matthew, Susan has had to become an expert at hiding any worries behind smiles. Her Arlington Heights home is full of warmth and beautiful things. She and her husband, William Filstead, share a great sense of humor despite the many trials they have had to go through since Susan suffered a massive stroke and became disabled one day after Matthew was born in 1992.

Susan and I have been friends for years, and I've always been awed by her devotion to her family and her ability to care about other people despite her own challenges. Even now, when some of her friends are struggling with their personal lives, Susan seems to know just when to call and remind us that underneath the ravages of a stroke and epilepsy, the same caring person exists.

On May 20, Susan will open a new chapter of her life.

After trying unsuccessfully for years to find a medical procedure that would cure her epilepsy, a result of the brain lesions she suffered during the stroke, Susan will do what she has always done best. That is, try to help make life better for others.

Since suffering a stroke at age 38, Susan has undergone four brain operations and has traveled across the country in search of a cure for her epilepsy. Although there has been no cure for her, she still hopes there may be a cure for others.

Through the Susan Eik Filstead Stroke & Epilepsy Foundation, Inc., an organization founded by Susan and her husband to help other stroke victims, Susan hopes to raise awareness of the effects of strokes on families and inspire the medical profession to find a cure for epilepsy and reverse the damage caused by strokes.

"Through education we hope to give medical students, residents and physicians a better understanding of what it is like to live with these diseases. They see patients on an in-patient or out-patient setting, but they have no idea what life is like at home," Susan told me.

The Marianne Strokirk Salons have supported a month-long educational and fund-raising campaign on behalf of the foundation. On next Saturday, the Chestnut Street Salon will

be the site of a daylong fund-raising event.

Susan met Strokirk about 13 years ago when Susan posed for a glamour shot for an Oak Street hair stylist. A large photo of Susan hung in the salon for years. Today, patrons at Strokirk's Chestnut Street salon will see another giant photo—this one of Susan and Matthew.

"The main reason for doing this is Matthew," Susan said. "To try and show him that we are going to try to do something to make a difference. We want to give Matthew hope."

Just as Susan is special, so is Matthew.

Besides being unusually articulate (the kid can carry on a conversation with just about anyone), he is wise beyond his years.

"He is very smart and has put a lot of things together," Susan said. "It has been very hard on him because of what happened to me the morning after he was born. He did not cause this, but he is taking on that burden all the time."

On March 8, when Susan had to be rushed to the emergency room, the reality of Matthew's fears added to the stress.

"Ever since he was old enough to have a sense about what is going on, he has been very concerned about me.

Something like this touches everyone. My dad is 79 and my mother is 81. While Bill stayed with me in the emergency room, Matthew said to my mom: 'I thought mommy was going to die.' He goes to bed every night worrying about me and stays up until he eventually falls asleep."

As with any child, Matthew wants his mom healthy. It is Susan's dream to give Matthew his wish.

In a letter written to potential donors to the foundation, her husband, Bill, expresses what many of Susan's friends know to be true:

*"Despite serious health problems, including intractable epilepsy, she exhibits courage and determination not to have these medical problems control her life. "Susan has refused to allow this tragedy to break her heart or spirit. Since May is National Stroke Awareness Month and also the month in which Mother's Day occurs, I want to let you know how proud my son and I are of this unique lady."*

Signed: William J. Filstead, Proud Husband and Matthew W. Filstead, Very, Very Proud Son.

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**Articles which appeared in the**  
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written by

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about

**Susan Eik Filstead**

# Chicago Sun-Times

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Mary A. (Johnson) Mitchell

## Good Enough Friends to Make It Work

**S**usan Filstead is my only white friend. The last time I saw her was probably more than a year ago. Susan would know exactly because she keeps up with these things better than I do.

But it was during the Christmas holidays, and she was weighted down with shopping bags. We met downtown for lunch at my favorite restaurant.

Susan brought along a plastic bag full of bacon buns that her mother-in-law makes. I can eat a dozen by myself. Susan always remembers to save me my dozen.

I met Susan while working at a downtown law firm. We were both secretaries. She got the job I wanted and thought I deserved. I ended up working for her.

It was easy to see that as a manager of departments where most of the employees were black, Susan wasn't going to last long.

She was too fair-minded.

By that I mean Susan is one of the rare white people I have run into who are really color-blind, even when it comes to the paycheck. There's something about green that makes most whites for whom I have worked see black and white.

Not Susan. She sees right and wrong. We got to be friends.

Good enough friends for me to talk about the impending breakup of my marriage and her to talk about finally getting her man to the altar.

Good enough friends for her to shut me up when I joked that fat women should cover up or stay off the beach.

Good enough to forget our differences.

Our birthdays are a day apart, and we both love hats.

One afternoon I went over to her apartment and we spent the whole day parading in front of a mirror in wild hats. When I left, she gave me three great hats and boxes for the ones I had scattered on a shelf in my closet.

When I told her that my father shares her love of the racetrack, she made me promise to bring him next time. I never did.

When Susan got married, I got an invitation to the shower and reception, but I didn't go because I had to work. She understood but made me promise not to let the friendship slip away.

When she moved into her new house, I came over for lunch. We sat around the kitchen and talked about her new life as a wife and mine as a reporter. Before I left Susan gave me a present. She had remembered my birthday.

Whenever too much time goes by, the phone rings and it is Susan.

In November, I got a call from her husband, Bill. Susan's baby shower had to be canceled. They were at the hospital. The baby was going to be early.

When I didn't hear anything for a couple of weeks, I called Susan.

On Nov. 6, Susan gave birth to Matthew, a healthy baby boy. The next day she had a stroke and nearly died. Today she is fighting to get her life back.

I hung up the phone and stared at it for a long time.

It is time to learn how to be Susan's friend.

# Chicago Sun-Times

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Mary A. (Johnson) Mitchell

## Marriage that Blooms in Tough Times is Magic

In a world where you can dump a mate quicker than you can find one, I am truly inspired by love.

I'm not talking about the rush of feelings that can overtake you when the air is fresh with the scent of spring. Or even the free fall into a relationship that lands in marriage.

I'm talking about the magic that molds two individuals into one for as long as they both shall live. I'm fascinated by the bond it takes for two people to stay together when their relationship is crossing over troubled water.

Many people want to love, but staying together isn't easy. I know. It doesn't take much to promise to stay with someone for life. It takes immeasurable faith to actually do so.

When tragedy strikes one spouse, and the other doesn't flee, I am in awe.

Real-life examples of both famous and ordinary people suggest that it is this kind of mystical love that gives people the strength to keep their vows even when they are in the deepest valley.

When Christopher Reeve was paralyzed in an equestrian accident in 1995, the tragedy also paralyzed his wife, Dana Morosini. She may not have suffered physically, but her life would never be the same. Reeve has since become a symbol of hope for the disabled. I can't imagine that happening without the faithfulness of Morosini.

Or, when Chicago police officer Jim Mullen was struck by a bullet last October and paralyzed, the bullet might as well have struck his wife, Athena, as well.

At 32, Mullen is a young man. We feel the pain of his loss. We also feel the love his wife must hold in order for him to have made it this far.

My friends Susan and Bill have taught me what it means to really love.

Before 1993, Susan was the kind of person who seemed to enjoy everything. Whether we were shopping for hats, or dancing around the sensitive issues of race and religion, I would always leave her feeling renewed.

But that year, she suffered a massive brain hemorrhage during childbirth. She lost the use of one side of her body and now has uncontrollable seizures. Her life is now confined to her home.

So much has happened. Soon after Susan's stroke, Bill lost his job and, for a while, the crucial medical benefits that she needed for rehabilitation.

Every day since her illness, Susan has depended on outside help to raise her growing son.

Instead of moping about, Bill started his own consulting business. He spends all of his spare time researching his wife's illness. He is undaunted in his task to find a treatment that will give his wife her life back.

I visited them recently, and again was amazed by their ability to cope with a situation that would send most people over the edge. They shared the same laughter and warmth that I've always remembered.

There was one small difference, however. They seemed even closer.

While I brought Susan up to date on all the changes in my life, Bill was at her side, doing things she used to do. "How about a sandwich?" "Something to drink?" He was just as attentive as Susan used to be.

After a while, he brought me up to date on the latest doctor Susan had been seeing, and the horrible time they've had finding adequate medical care.

"We are still struggling with seizures," he said. "Sometimes we have a hard time walking and standing up. We just found out that our brain is swelling."

"We," he said. "We."

Coming from his lips, the word didn't sound condescending, or out of place.

Nonetheless, it was strange. Bill wasn't just talking about Susan, he was talking about himself.

At that point, I broke the promise I always make to myself that I would not whine about their troubles. I had to know how they have survived all the tragedy.

"We're in this together," Bill told me. "You know what it is. It's love. Our love is stronger than what happened."

Susan fought bravely to hold back tears.

"There's always that fear," she said. "I've been in support groups where there are women whose husbands have left."

"But when I faced death, when I knew that I might not make it out of surgery, I looked at Bill and said: 'You're the best, very best thing that has happened in my life.' And I meant it."

"I'm here until the end," was the last thing she heard Bill say before her old life ended.

To love someone and know that that person will always be there, no matter what, is the very best gift that the world has to offer. I am grateful that is the gift God has given my friend.