

Chicago Sun-Times

May 14, 2000

Mary A. (Johnson) Mitchell

Sick Mom Wants to Give Hope to Son and Others

Matthew'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.

Copyright © The Sun-Times Company
All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.