



# A New Life

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Left: The Filsteads

**P**acking lunches, washing clothes, making beds — it's all in a day's work for a full-time mother. But what if her work is constantly interrupted because she cannot control her body?

Her fingers may move involuntarily or her vision becomes shadowy. Sometimes she may experience sharp pains, or she might fall and remain unconscious for several minutes. Now imagine it happening 25 times a day. Susan Filstead doesn't have to imagine; this is her life. Susan has intractable epilepsy, which means she has daily seizures that cannot be controlled. Since the time of her stroke in 1992, she has had over 18,000 seizures — and counting. (Seizures are involuntary bursts of electrical activity in the brain that prevent a person from controlling his or her body.)

"It's a nightmare," says her husband Bill. "There's no way around it, but I told Susan, 'till the end of time I will be there for you.' She would be there if the same thing happened to me."

Ironically, the nightmare started the morning after Susan gave birth to their son Matthew. Before she ever had a chance to settle into motherhood, she had a bleeding stroke. Due to the hemorrhage, Susan lost her eyesight temporarily and movement in her left hand and leg permanently. She needed brain surgery to alleviate the swelling from the hemorrhage. An abscess formed in the area requiring surgery, which is the cause of her seizures.

When asked how she goes on, Susan says, "I just do it. There is no other choice. I feel I have to be hopeful — not only for myself, but mainly for Matthew. Matthew is my driving force."

Her anti-convulsant medicine causes fatigue and slows her thinking, which compounds the effects of her stroke.

Regardless of her condition, Susan is fully involved in being a wife and mother. She gets up early every morning. She likes to read and cook, and the entire family enjoys shows and plays. She rides a scooter to see Matthew play soccer at a field near their home in Arlington Heights, Illinois. Last year Susan was a room parent for Matthew's first-grade class. Her father drove her to the school because she cannot drive.

In 1999, Susan and Bill started the Susan Eik Filstead Stroke and Epilepsy Foundation to raise money to help stroke survivors and support research on stroke and epilepsy. "Our ultimate goal is to find a cure for epilepsy," says Bill. "That may sound utopian, but why not shoot high?" (For more information, check their Web site at [sefsef.org](http://sefsef.org).)

So far they have raised enough money to establish a fund for stroke survivors at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, where Susan went through rehab. The goal of the fund is to improve quality of life by helping stroke survivors pay for medical expenses.

Bill says that Susan has taught him a lot about strength. "We both knew we would have bad moments after the stroke, but not a bad life. We are not trying to recapture the life we once had. We have a new life." ■

*This article was adapted from an interview with the Filstead family and the article "The Quest for a Cure" by Jerry Wallis in the Arlington Heights Post in Arlington Heights, Illinois.*

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Susan Filstead and son Matthew