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## Hands on: A stroke ended her opera life but started her new career as a trainer for stroke survivors

By Joy Victory

The Journal News

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Strolling the Upper East Side in her snug pink sweatsuit and matching sneakers, Hazella Rollins-LaVar could be mistaken for a bubbly aerobics instructor or a J. Lo. look-alike.



*Hazella Rollins-LaVar helps David Demm of Croton-on-Hudson stretch as part of his post-stroke recovery. Rollins-LaVar founded Stroke of Hope, a hands-on organization for stroke survivors and their families.*

It's a muggy summer day, and she's on her way to the physical therapy floor of the Florence Nightingale Rehabilitation Center in Manhattan. Once there, she smiles when she spots Eugene Pendarvis, a wheelchair-bound stroke survivor from Mount Vernon.

He's sitting in the hallway, waiting. He smiles back.

Rollins-LaVar is Pendarvis' personal fitness trainer, hired by his wife, Maxine, after his health insurance stopped paying for physical therapy. She takes him to a physical therapy room.

Several staff members stop to watch the 5-foot-3 trainer carefully stretch 6-foot-8-inch Pendarvis. With eyes closed, she seems almost entranced in her work. Several times she stares intensely at Pendarvis, telling him to focus on her and forget about the noisy bustle in the room.

Stroke survivors struggle to concentrate, she says, and she would know: In November 1999 —while alone in her Yonkers home with her 12-day-old daughter, Vanessa — she suffered a cataclysmic stroke on her brain stem. At the hospital, she awoke to find she was lactating but unable to nurse on her own, to eat or even to swallow.

Her career as a world-touring opera singer was over. But she considered herself blessed — most people with brain stem strokes die.

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In 2003, after years of extensive medical care and hard work, Rollins-LaVar felt recovered enough to work, although she had bouts of fatigue and facial numbness that she still battles.

With the backing of her husband and her church, Grace Baptist Church in Mount Vernon, she founded Stroke of Hope, a hands-on organization for stroke survivors and their "care partners" in the Westchester area. Rollins-LaVar refers to caregivers as partners, viewing recovery as a team effort.



Visitors to the Web site [www.strokeofhope.net](http://www.strokeofhope.net) will find an eight-person medical team, who help Rollins-LaVar answer questions submitted via e-mail. Rollins-LaVar can also coordinate volunteer "Hope Teams" to give the care partner a much-needed break, or to organize personal training for the survivor.

"This has grown out of a really hopeless situation," Rollins-LaVar says. "You have to find your purpose."

### **Gaps in care**

Unlike many health organizations, Stroke of Hope works directly with families, especially those who have been abandoned by their health insurance.

This was born of personal experience, Rollins-LaVar says. A few months into her recovery, she says, her insurance company told her it wouldn't pay for more physical therapy. She was taking too long to heal.

"They told me I could have a walker, a wheelchair and a g-tube (stomach feeding tube) and that was enough," Rollins-LaVar says. "I had been cut off. At that point, I couldn't use my tongue. A nurse told me, 'This is the game they play.'"

The impact of a stroke, which occurs when a brain artery ruptures or is blocked by a clot, usually causes long-lasting health and mobility problems.

So as soon as she was healthy enough, Rollins-LaVar became a personal fitness trainer certified to work with stroke survivors. Her intent was to take up the slack when health-insurance companies deny long-term coverage. She has worked with eight such survivors.

Rollins-LaVar also assembled a medical team that can answer questions submitted through the Web site. Her choice of doctors was again based on her personal experience — for example, no one told her to see a cardiologist or a psychiatrist, even though stroke survivors desperately need both, she says.

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Dr. Nirmla Reddy, a psychiatrist with offices in Scarsdale and Yonkers, agrees, noting that many stroke survivors are not referred to psychiatrists. But a stroke, she says, can frequently create mysterious psychiatric problems, not to mention relationship problems between the survivor and caregiver. Certain medicines also can cause mental health disturbances.

"A lot of psychological issues suddenly evolve," says Reddy, who treated Rollins-LaVar for post-stroke depression. "It's very different for each patient. The dynamics of the family unit change. So just giving antidepressants or saying, 'Don't worry, you'll be fine,' is not the answer."



### **A miraculous ordeal**

Support for care partners is woefully lacking, Reddy says.

Rollins-LaVar's husband, Jeff, knows this all too well. In the days after his wife's stroke, he had to take care of a newborn baby and a hospitalized wife, and somehow tend to a full-time job. He was overwhelmed.

"When a survivor survives, in our opinion, a miracle has occurred. But the care partner's life is going to change forever because of something that happened to someone else," says LaVar, who now owns LaVar Hair Designs in Manhattan.

Before his wife's stroke, both were opera singers and they met on tour. Their love of music and performing brought them together. Rollins-LaVar said after her stroke, she woke to see her husband standing over her hospital bed, tears streaming down his face.

"The one thing that is not addressed is that people don't know how to be a care partner. I didn't know anything about stroke," LaVar says. "Basically your social life is over. And you're not taking care of yourself, and what good are you if you don't take of yourself? What I tell care partners is, 'It's your life and their recovery.' "

He learned he had to ask his family and friends for help with the basics: laundry, grocery shopping, baby-sitting.

"Anything that I didn't do — normal things — meant I had more time for emotional support for her, and that's what she needed," he says.

LaVar now counsels care partners involved with Stroke of Hope, including Maxine Pendarvis, whose 57-year-old husband, Eugene, had a stroke in February. Two months later, his twin brother, Earl, also had a stroke.

When Eugene Pendarvis' health insurance stopped paying for physical therapy,

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Maxine turned to Stroke of Hope. Rollins-LaVar, who normally works with stroke survivors at their homes, agreed to drive to the Manhattan nursing home to help Eugene continue with his exercises.

Pendarvis is now at home, and the couple hopes to move to Florida soon. Rollins-LaVar plans to visit.

"He tells me, 'Hazella knows what I am going through,' " Maxine Pendarvis says. "And she's helped me to understand what he's going through."

To learn more

For more information on Stroke of Hope, call 914-965-3613 or visit [www.strokeofhope.net](http://www.strokeofhope.net).

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