

Stroke of love, not luck, makes tow play better than one

Profile of Judy and Everett Amos:

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-Everett Amos



Judy and Everett Amos play sweet music together Photo by Ed Conroy

How did that chewing gum get on the bottom of my shoe, wondered Everett Amos, as he drove back to his Portsmouth church on Sunday in August, 1991.

His shoe felt like it was stuck to the accelerator. When he got out of his car, something was terribly wrong: he kept falling to the right, his balance was gone, and he didn't know what was happening to him.

But the doctors at the hospital knew, and they kept him for tests the next day.

“But I didn’t get to the next day,” said Amos in a slightly slurred voice. While seated behind his desk at Crenshaw Methodist Church, where he is Music Director, you wouldn’t know his right side was partially paralyzed.

Amos doesn’t hesitate to shake your hand, offering an arm that hangs stiff and fingers that don’t move. It’s OK, his warm smile says. Though awkward, the shake lets you know that being paralyzed is not contagious.

Amos could recall every detail of that day in the hospital his life changed.

“During the night I had a big one.” Amos wasn’t referring to an earthquake—but he was knocked to the ground just the same. “I knew everything that was happening. It was a hot feeling that went down my leg. And that was it. My whole right side was paralyzed. There was a blockage in the back of my brain, and that part is dead now.”

The doctors didn’t know why Amos had this devastating stroke. He was only 54, and as a church music director, he didn’t have as much job stress as most people have. He did have high blood pressure, but not dangerous, he thought.

Wait, a music director, did you say? Here was a man who made his living at the organ. From his earliest memory, he has been sitting at the keyboard using both hands. And when he wasn’t at the organ, he was playing golf—with two hands on the club. And his other love was being an umpire—and who has seen an umpire who can’t throw his right arm and fingers out to count the strikes?

Three weeks after the stroke, Amos went to the golf course: “I couldn’t do anything. My club couldn’t hit the ground. I tried tying my paralyzed hand to the club, but the hand swelled.” Amos didn’t return to the golf course or three years. He said he didn’t want to make people wait for him.

Three years have passed since Amos was felled by his stroke. His physical therapy never stopped, not his determination not to be a “stroke victim.”

He had progressed, but so slowly he didn’t realize just how much until last week.

“I went out on the golf course last week for the first time since my stroke. I was never more amazed in my life! I was able to hit the ground with the club!

“My goodness, I have made progress! I played 36 holes, and I didn’t hold up anybody. In fact, we were waiting on other people. I was so excited that I took a club last night and showed Judy how I could hit the ball.”

Who was Judy? This story didn’t start three years ago, but back in high school when Everett taught Judy to play the organ.

The high school sweethearts got engaged, went to college together. They were inseparable. Then Amos allowed the relationship to break up. “I was just too immature,” he says now.

Away at an assembly center one summer, Everett read the announcement: Judy was getting married! “And to the fellow I took her away from in the first place!” exclaimed Amos, still showing the shock he felt then.

Then Amos got married to someone else, and he lost contact with Judy. Twenty years later, their marriages ended in divorce.

In 1981, a friend happened to ask him if he knew Judy’s husband left her. For Amos, this was a miraculous “stroke of luck!”

“I couldn’t wait to get to the phone. We met and two years later were married. It was the best thing that ever happened to me.” When Amos talks about Judy, you’d think he was still on his honeymoon.

Now you know what this story is really about: it's not about a disabling stroke, but an "enabling" stroke. Judy was his "stroke of love"—and, try as he might, he never recovered.

Ten years later, comes "the big stroke." Only now Amos wasn't alone; he had love, luck, and Judy with him.

What do you do when your right hand is taken away? What good is a one-armed organist?

Here was the choice: play the victim or play the opportunity. When an opening came at Crenshaw's for a music director, Judy, who was already known in this area, suggested they take the job as a team. We know how Amos played it.

"I'm the director, she's my organist and pianist," said Amos with a great smile. Both teach music, and Judy directs the handbell choir, which she loves. Together they work with eight choirs.

"I can play the organ with my left hand and my feet," said Amos. "I can hold my right foot up more than I used to. Last Sunday we played together, me at the organ, she at the piano. "They even play the organ together—when they can find music written for three hands.

Reflecting on the strokes that brought him to Blackstone, Amos finds that his life has changed in an unforeseen way. For the first time in his life he no longer thinks about his "next job."

As a son of a Methodist minister, who moved every few years, he grew up never knowing what "home" felt like.

But, like love, you know "home" when you find it. Amos feels that he is finally home now. "I'll stay here forever," he exclaimed. "That's how much I like it."

If you ask those who have seen and heard the work this musical team is doing, you might say it was Blackstone's "stroke of good fortune" that brought them here.