

St. Mary's stroke center keeps Elvis tribute singer in the groove

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COURTESY PHOTO: Al Maeyens likes to sing the less-known Elvis songs when performing as Elvis and The Memphis Beat.

Oh, it'd be easy to use all the Elvis clichés about Al Maeyens' recent stroke, to say he was "All Shook Up" or in "Trouble" or that it was almost "Too Much," or that his wife, Dee, could've been in "Heartbreak Hotel" if not for her husband's "Good Luck Charm."

Easy, yes. Too easy. Because a stroke is serious business. Deadly serious.

"He was paralyzed, unable to speak, deteriorating rapidly," recalls Dr. Ali R. Malek, who treated Mr. Maeyens at St. Mary's Medical Center. "He had a blockage in his basal artery, the main artery that feeds the brain."

Mr. Maeyens, who is an Elvis Presley tribute singer – "Don't say 'Elvis impersonator,'" he says, "that sounds demeaning" – well, he doesn't remember much about the day his life almost ended, the day he now calls "that extraordinary event in my life."



Al Maeyens. What he does remember is what led up to it:

It was November of 2012. He had an Elvis booking scheduled for December 2. He'd been having vertigo and what he calls "shimmering auras" in his eyes. He visited an Ear/Nose/Throat (ENT) specialist, who diagnosed an inner-ear problem. He returned home. The dizziness continued. He went to a nearby hospital ER, got a CT scan, another inner-ear diagnosis and a prescription for Antivert, an antihistamine that treats the symptoms of motion sickness. No relief. Back to the ER and, this time, a prescription for valium. Still no relief. He called his ENT specialist, who told him to cease taking the meds and return for another appointment. He lay down on the couch to take a nap. Then the phone

rang.



Dr. Ali R. Malek

“It was my daughter-in-law calling,” Mr. Maeyens says, “and I tried to speak but I couldn’t. My wife came downstairs just then, and realized there was a problem. She called 911.”

An ambulance transported him to Palm Beach Gardens Medical Center, where doctors performed a scan, found a blood clot in his brain and e-mailed the results to St. Mary’s Medical Center, a Comprehensive Stroke Center recognized for its state-of-the-art technology and expertise in the field of neurovascular conditions. Mr. Maeyens was immediately transferred to St. Mary’s, where — he later learned — doctors classified him as a Category 21 stroke victim. Strokes are numerically classified as 1 through 42, with 21 and higher considered “Severe,” the most serious level.

“That is, like, knocking on death’s door,” he says.



Al Maeyens, here in his Elvis tribute jumpsuit, watches his diet carefully since he suffered a stroke in 2012. COURTESY PHOTOS

Fortunately for Mr. Maeyens, Dr. Malek was there to hear it.

“Within minutes, he was in the angiosuite,” the doctor says, referring to the specialized angiography lab, outfitted with top-notch scanning and imaging technology. “We did multimodal imaging” – different scanning methods to view the same area – “to see where the blockage is, how much of the brain is damaged, how much is salvageable. So, then, I go in through the femoral artery, the main artery in the leg, threading a catheter up to the blockage, ensnare the clot with a stentriever” – a long, thin, self-expanding mesh tube that grabs a blood clot – “and remove it.”

The entire lifesaving procedure took somewhere between 10 and 20 minutes.

“Every minute that passes, 1.9 million brain cells die,” Dr. Malek says. “That’s why we say ‘Time is brain.’ It’s the difference between life, death and quality of life.”

And there are times, the doctor says, when death is preferable.

“With all strokes, essentially, part of the brain has died, a part of the brain dies permanently,” he says, and when treatment fails to come in time, the result can be catastrophic, when, as he says, “If you’re lucky, you die. If you’re not, you have locked-in syndrome. You can feel things, you can understand what’s happening around you, but you can only blink. That is a fate worse than death.”

Think of the movie “The Diving Bell and the Butterfly,” the 2007 memoir of French journalist Jean-Dominique Bauby that recounts the wrenching story of the massive stroke that left him paralyzed, able only to blink. Mr. Bauby wrote his story with the aid of a transcriber that

repeatedly recited the alphabet, responding to the blinks of his left eyelid – about two minutes per word, some 200,000 blinks to retell his experience.

“We prevent things from getting worse,” Dr. Malek says. “And we try to prevent (strokes) from happening again.”

Al Maeyens spent a few days in St. Mary’s Intensive Care Unit and Recovery Room, then resumed his life. “Dr. Malek did the miracle,” he says. “He saved my life. And I never missed a booking. I made the December 2 show, a three-hour show. So, Elvis never left the building.”

Sure, he says, things were a bit rocky for a while. It took time to, as he says, “get my legs back.” Walking is still a tad difficult, and he knows that, as he says, “Once you’ve had a stroke, there’s always the possibility of another one.” So there’s a regimen to follow, there are things to think about.

Still, the show went on.

Mr. Maeyens enjoys recounting how Al-as-Elvis came about. “It was all my wife’s fault,” he says, and laughs. “She and her girlfriend would go to a karaoke bar in downtown West Palm Beach” – this was about 11 years ago, when he was 54 – “and they asked me to sing something, and I said, ‘Nope.’ But after they badgered me for a while, I said, ‘OK.’”

He sang “Chantilly Lace.”

A friend told him his voice was “right for Elvis.”

And so it began. At first, he made all his own costumes and, he says, “jazzed them up with bling.” Sequins. Rhinestones. Macramé.

Next, he grew sideburns. “My son told me, ‘No glue-ons. They look like crap,’” he says. “On the street, little kids look at me and yell, ‘Wolverine!’ and I say, ‘No, Elvis. Ask your mom and dad. They’ll know.’”

After a while, he graduated to buying Elvis jumpsuits, often on e-bay. His most recent purchase: the Apache jumpsuit, purest white, red macramé belt, silvery bling along the torso and leg. Most go for “\$500, \$600 a pop,” he says, but he admits to a \$1,500 jumpsuit that he just couldn’t resist. “And those prices, that’s without all the add-ons, belts and things. You know, it’s like a car – ‘Do you want a steering wheel? That’s extra.’”

He sings all the songs. “Elvis recorded over 429 songs,” he says. “I like the more obscure ones, the songs that audiences don’t know. ‘Suspicious Minds.’ ‘My Way.’ Elvis did a better job on that than Frank did.” Better than Sinatra? Mr. Maeyens has a weekly, hour-long radio show, on W4CY.com, Mondays at 1 p.m. “I sing and field phone calls, talk about Elvis,” he says. “I play some of his songs.”

He's all Elvis, all the time – except where his diet is concerned. His stroke altered his Elvisesque eating habits, big time. And he began exercising.

“I had a rotten diet,” he says, “and it caught up with me. Burgers. French fries. Milkshakes. High cholesterol? Oh, yes. But I've changed. All fat out of my diet. Now, it's chicken, turkey, fish – all grilled.”

The stroke that led Al Maeyens to Dr. Malek happened almost two years ago, but the doctor remembers him well. “I remember all my strokes that are traumatic,” the doctor says, “and he is a great marker for how much someone can recover ... He changed his diet, he changed his lifestyle.”

Every year, more than 795,000 people have strokes in the United States, and about 130,000 of them – on average, one every four minutes – die from them. About 185,000 strokes happen to people who have had them before.

The primary ways to prevent a stroke, according to the Centers for Disease Control: eating a healthy diet, maintaining a healthy weight, getting enough exercise, not smoking and limiting the use of alcohol.

“Find out what your own risk factors are,” Dr. Malek says. “The most important thing to remember is that anyone can have a stroke. Children can have a stroke. I did the same procedure (that Mr. Maeyens had) on a 90-year-old woman recently, and she is fine. A 27-year-old woman did not survive. An ounce of prevention really does make a difference, getting help as fast as you can.

“If people actually did what they needed to do, the number of strokes would be reduced to 70,000 a year ... The more time we spend sitting on our butts, the sooner we end up in our graves.” †