

Phill's story

In 2014, at the age of 44, Phill suffered a massive stroke. Only a few months earlier Phill had started a high-level marketing role for global fashion company Mexx, based in Amsterdam. Phill, his wife Rosie, and two children (5yo and 2yo) had relocated from their home country to the Netherlands where his children had commenced school and kinder. The stroke left Phill without movement on the right side of his body and with aphasia. Phill was unable to understand what his family were saying to him and unable to communicate his immediate needs and wants or simply talk to his family through speaking or writing. After 1 month of rehabilitation in Amsterdam, Phill was transferred back to his hometown of Liverpool, England. His parents provided support while his wife and children planned their return to the UK. The speech therapy offered by the NHS in the first six months of Phill's recovery was, in Phill's words, 'awful'. The services available were limited and left Phill feeling without hope. While occupational therapy and physiotherapy were good, speech therapy did not start until over 1 month from his discharge from hospital due to staff shortages, and when it did start Phill found his therapist was not focused on his needs as a young Stroke Survivor, was not interested in making it relevant to his life and capabilities and did not incorporate any apps or technology despite Phill's interest and skill in this area. He was unable to return to his beloved marketing career -

"I miss working. I loved my work and communicating with people. I was always on the phone and working collaboratively. If you'd have given me a choice of having my legs cut off or losing my ability to communicate, I would have chosen cutting my legs off. Talking to people is what I did, it was who I was!"

Phill embraced his new role as stay-at-home father but said that there has been challenging times -

"When I first had the stroke, the kids were so young.... I couldn't read to them, I couldn't explain to them what had happened to me, I couldn't comfort them and talk to them when I wanted to [...] even now that they're older...it's better...but I can't always find the words to talk them through difficult situations or give them advice in the way that I want to."



Pictured: Phill with his young family in Amsterdam 2 weeks after his stroke.

Over the next five years Phill worked casually for the Stroke Association in the UK advocating for aphasia, which he found rewarding and which opened doors for him. Phill found a great private speech therapist and also continued NHS therapy but maintained very self-driven. His understanding of language had improved but it remained very hard for him to communicate with people verbally or on email. He was left feeling isolated - kids were in school and Rosie at work full-time. It was difficult to connect with new people and even though he needed (and wanted) to communicate to improve, he struggled to find opportunities to do so. Phill volunteered to try out any ways to improve his aphasia, including a program of SHOUT (designed for Parkinson's sufferers when they start to lose volume) and learning sign language to trigger his blocked words with a visual prompt.

In 2020, Phill and his family emigrated to Brisbane, Australia. It was through a student clinic at The University of Queensland that Phill was introduced to the CHAT team at QARC and STARS and commenced the therapy program. The program was the first 8 week, intensive and comprehensive program that Phill had been able to access over the course of his recovery.



Pictured: Phill working with software developer Ryan Deslandes in the Aphasia Tech Hub.

"I loved that it was 3 days every week for 8 weeks. My talking got better. After CHAT I was able to talk more with my kids and wife... CHAT gave me the confidence to try".

Phill made new friends and following CHAT became involved in the QARC Aphasia Tech Hub as an advisor, built a communication app and set up a photography business. Phill's interest and skill in technology and his marketing background was a huge asset to the QARC team and saw Phill employed by UQ part time. Phill now works on multiple grant-funded research projects and is part of the Aphasia Tech Hub operations team. Recently Phill presented to a group of people with aphasia and family members about technology. The response to his presentation was overwhelmingly positive.

Phill is incredibly grateful for what QARC has given him –

"It has given me a job where I can use my skills and help people!! I have made new friends and can communicate regularly with people which is great!"