



# The USC Aphasia Lab Newsletter

**Research and Community News for People with Aphasia, Their Families, and the Rehabilitation Professionals Who Work with Them**

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## All Things ACE!

SARA SAYERS

The Aphasia Community Event—also known as ACE—is one of the highlights of our year! We always look forward to this special time to come together with our participants and their families, local rehab professionals, lab members, and the broader aphasia community. It's a day to share resources, make meaningful connections, and enjoy the beautiful views of Columbia along with some delicious local food.

This year, we were thrilled to welcome Dr. Katie Strong from Central Michigan University, who gave an inspiring talk titled "Discovering Ourselves Through Storytelling." We shared lots of laughs during the performance by the "Play on Words" Aphasic Drama Club, and we were deeply moved by the creativity of James Stephens, stroke survivor and author, who presented a video about his story and books, "The Suspect Speaker Series."

**It was truly an unforgettable day. Every single one of you is a vital part of our Aphasia Lab story—and together, we're creating something powerful and meaningful.**



Check out the video  
for highlights  
of the event!



<https://tinyurl.com/ACE-2025-Slideshow>





## Advocacy Day: Community Poem

On April 8<sup>th</sup>, South Carolinians rallied in front of the SC State House for Advocacy Day for Access and Independence.

**The goal? To make a barrier-free SC or people with disabilities.**

To raise aphasia awareness at this incredible event, our Virtual Aphasia Support Group co-created a powerful community living poem, which was read by our Aphasia Ambassador, James.



Check out the video by clicking the link or scanning the QR code:

<https://tinyurl.com/2025-Advocacy-Day-Poem>



### Our Right to Belong

*co-created by the Virtual Aphasia Recovery Group  
with the USC Aphasia Lab*

I wake up each day with hope in my heart,  
Dreaming of freedom, a world with open arms.  
Yet barriers stand where a helping hand should be,  
But standing together, we can overcome it.

We fight for freedom, we fight for our say,  
We fight for the right to live freely each day.

We call for acceptance, we call for what's fair,  
For work that includes us, for opportunities that are there.

We ask for help, we ask for a ride,  
To move through our lives with purpose and pride.

We push for visibility, we push to remain,  
In homes in our cities, with recognition and not hidden away.  
We stand for what's right, we stand for what's just,  
For support we can count on, a system we trust.

We demand accessibility,

We demand to be heard,

We demand to be strong.

We demand our inclusion where we belong.

## The Awareness Garden: Planting Knowledge About Aphasia







## For Caregivers, Care Partners, and Backups

CAYLEE BRAND

Let's talk terms! Some people with aphasia and their families prefer to use the term **caregiver**, and others prefer **care partner**. Marcus, a stroke survivor who has aphasia, refers to his wife Marsha as his **"backup."** Deciding what term is right for you and your loved one with aphasia can be empowering and beneficial for the recovery process.

### The six month improvement period is a myth!

"We were told the standard answer is 6 months...that's as good as you're gonna get wherever you are, at 6 months," said Marsha. It is common for people with aphasia and their caregivers to be told that the majority of improvement occurs in the first six months, and after that recovery is more static. But Marcus and Marsha learned that was untrue. Two years after his stroke, Marcus had about 12 intelligible words. **Now, nearly 10 years after his stroke, Marcus is an Aphasia Ambassador who shares his story with recent stroke survivors and students with detail, wit, and authenticity.** If he gets stuck on a word or phrase, his backup is there to help him out. Charles, a person with aphasia, was told the same thing; after six months he would no longer improve. However, he explained that after "a year, two year, I getting my speech back, my walking better, and I can drive."

### It can be helpful to think outside of the box.

Passwords are important, and if your loved one with aphasia has typed them out enough times prior to their stroke, they may be muscle memory! Tamela realized that this was true for her husband James, who has aphasia. She would stand over his shoulder and write them down as he typed.

Another way caregivers and backups for people with aphasia can think outside of the box is by finding new ways to say things. When Marsha and Marcus were going through vocabulary picture books to practice recalling common words, they got stuck on the word, "rabbit." Marcus struggled to say it, and Marsha thought, "maybe if he says it a hundred times it'll come out like 'rabbit.'" So he kept saying it, and then he just looked at me, and he goes...just real clear, 'bunny.'" Marcus and Marsha learned that when encountering a challenging word, taking a pause and trying to find another way to say it can be helpful.

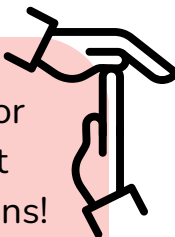
### Prioritize taking care of yourself, too.

As a care partner who is dedicated to providing support for your loved one, it can be easy to forget to take care of yourself too. If you can, take time for yourself whether that be through a hobby, lunch with friends, or even going on a walk. Additionally, building a strong network of support through your family and friends, your neighborhood, your church, and/or the USC Aphasia Lab can be immensely helpful. Tamela stated that **"if friends offer help, take it. As a caregiver, mental breaks are necessary."**

### Bonus Tip!

Pick an easy **code word** or **gesture** to help prevent communication breakdowns!

Tamela and James use the referee "T" (time out) gesture when they need to pause, slow down, or start over.



# Woody's Journey to Aphasia Recovery

CAYLEE BRAND

Woody grew up in Virginia Beach, where he owned a bar with great food and live music. And during his free time, he ran...a lot. Between 1997 and 1999, Woody ran 3 marathons, which is equivalent to almost 80 miles.

Approximately 9 years ago, he had a stroke, resulting in aphasia. He could still think of everything he wanted to say, but it just wouldn't come out right. He explained that his **"thinking very good...words ehh, not so good."**

During his recovery, he moved to Columbia, South Carolina, and began a new chapter of his life. Though he struggled with language, Woody remained optimistic and dedicated to his recovery. He found community in the USC Aphasia Lab, which he became involved in about 7 years ago. He is a regular in Drama Group, Lunch Bunch, and other community events where he enjoys spending time with his friends. Woody also kept running.

Woody began running in local races, and has competed in twenty-six 5ks between 2019 and 2025. His most recent race was the 5k at St Pats in Five Points in March, 2025.

Surviving a stroke is a life changing experience. Many who have a stroke can no longer move like they used to, communicate like they used to, or overall live like they used to. This is all true for Woody. **But in spite of not being able to do things exactly as he used to prior to his stroke, he found new ways of doing things he loved.** Instead of running 26.2 miles in three races, he has been running 3.1 miles in 26 races. At his bar, he used to watch musicians on stage, and now he gets on the stage himself with the Aphasia Lab Drama Group. He adapted to writing with his left hand after being a righty his whole life. One thing that stayed the same? You will never catch him wearing Gamecock gear - he is almost always repping Clemson orange - but we'll reluctantly forgive him for that.



**Woody running a marathon in Virginia Beach in 1997**



**Woody and his brother-in-law at ACE 2025**

Everyone's journey with aphasia is different, and it often is a long and winding road. But step by step, it gets a little easier. Woody explained that, **"long time ago stroke, it was not so good. But little bit, okay, let's go. It was thinking a little bit...little bit...little bit. Boom. Let's go. And friends...friends is good."**



# Post-Stroke Aphasia and Employment

DR. SIGFUS KRISTINSSON, KARA WILLIS, AND SARAH KATON

Each individual with post-stroke aphasia follows their own unique path to recovery. During the recovery process there will be goals towards improving functional communication abilities, physical abilities, independence with daily living and re-integration into social activities and the community, often with the support of family, friends, and caregivers. With improved confidence, abilities, and independence, many desire to return to the job market, whether it is to a previous role or new path of employment. Factors such as personal communication challenges, physical abilities, support system, and fatigue can create barriers with returning to the workforce. In this article, we share the stories of three young stroke survivors with aphasia and their experiences with returning to work.

## Interviewees

Our first interviewee, **Leslie Simpson**, is a lobbyist for the South Carolina Association of Counties. At 39 years of age, Leslie had a left hemispheric stroke due to a blood clot in the brain in February of 2021. She was diagnosed with aphasia, which greatly affected her ability to speak, and experienced impaired memory function. Our second interviewee, **Shawn Corley**, had a stroke in April of 2019. At 42 years of age, a massive blood clot in the brain ultimately resulted in aphasia. Before his stroke, Shawn was a bartender at a local arts bar, where he engaged with customers, mixed beverages, and managed transactions, but like Leslie, he was left to navigate a new sense of normalcy. Our third and last interviewee, **Charles Nottingham**, similarly had a stroke in his early 40s in April of 2016.



**Charles Nottingham ran his own truck business. He had a stroke in April of 2016.**

His stroke left him with right-sided mobility impairments and aphasia. Charles owned his own trucking business before his stroke, requiring him to hire and manage multiple truck drivers and manage finances. **Despite different backgrounds, Leslie, Shawn, and Charles shared a common desire to return to work.**



**Leslie Simpson is a lobbyist for the South Carolina Association of Counties. She had a stroke in February of 2021.**

## Determination and Self-Advocacy Attributed to Success

Initially, after Leslie had her stroke, she was only able to say four words. From the start of her recovery, Leslie was determined to get back to her original job. She advocated for her needs among her peers and medical staff. She took time on her own to research her diagnosis and hone her skills. When she learned new speech therapy exercises that were tailored to her job as a lobbyist, Leslie studied and practiced the techniques outside of therapy. As a general philosophy, Leslie approached her recovery in the same way she had prepared for her bar exam as a student, and told herself that she only had one option: to recover.

After Shawn had his stroke, he realized he would not be able to return to bartending. At least not his pre-stroke position. He experienced mental fatigue, and difficulty with recalling words and use of numbers. He took the initiative to pursue another role at his job and he was able to integrate his previous role as a bartender into a new managerial role.



**Shawn Corley is a manager at a local art bar. He had a stroke in April of 2019.**

He took his recovery seriously and purchased workbooks to strengthen his cognitive and communication abilities. He specifically worked on word retrieval and the clarity of his speech. He was persistent in practicing communication with others and staying engaged in conversation. As a result of his persistence, he is currently working with inventory, making sure everything is stocked, and ordering supplies when needed.

Charles' situation was different from Leslie's and Shawn's as he owned his own business, which often required him to juggle multiple roles at once. However, after his stroke, Charles was unable to keep his business afloat and he was forced to let go of his work staff. He began his recovery by attending a rehabilitation camp designed to help stroke survivors adapt to their new abilities. There, he learned how to regain daily functioning through structured guidance on how to adapt to life post-stroke. To this day, Charles attends

speech therapy multiple times a week, working on exercises designed to help him regain independence. He also attends community-based aphasia groups and participates in the drama group "Play on Words" at the University of South Carolina, where he performs plays and improv with other individuals with aphasia to improve communication confidence.

### **Different Experiences Lead to Different Outcomes**

Leslie, Shawn, and Charles are all capable of re-entering the workforce. They underwent extensive rehabilitation and went above and beyond in their efforts to recover. Leslie and Shawn were able to return to their original jobs due to the support they received (and their undeterred hard work); their work environment adapted to their needs and their roles were temporarily flexible. On the other hand, as his own boss, Charles did not have support from an employer, so he struggled to re-integrate into the workforce.

While each story is unique, they echo a common theme: It's not only about resilience, hard work, and determination. It's also about lack of awareness and knowledge about aphasia. **Individuals living with aphasia may have the ability and qualifications to return to work in a modified capacity; however, employers must be willing to accommodate any communication or physical barriers.** In this context, a lack of knowledge may result in missed opportunities to employ highly capable individuals. Increasing awareness of aphasia and its implications for employment is instrumental and the reward is worth the effort: The opportunity to work and the promise of job security offers individuals with aphasia and their families a means to an end, a meaningful role in life, and improved quality of life. By extension, it positively enriches our shared community.

*This is a shortened version of the original article.  
To see the full article scan the QR code here:*



### **Sharing Community Resources**

The **National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD)** at the University of Alabama (UAB) School of Health Professions offers:

- **Coffee Club Care partners group** meets once a month: <https://tinyurl.com/NCHPAD-Coffee-Club>
- **Free online health and wellness programs** through [NCHPAD Connect](#).

Check out their wealth of resources on mindfulness, nutrition, exercise, and more – tailored to your needs. Start your wellness journey today!

**Step-by-Step** guide on how to sign up: <https://tinyurl.com/NCHPAD-Sign-up>





## Hide and Speak Up for Aphasia

One way the USC Aphasia Lab spreads aphasia awareness is through beautiful painted rocks hidden around the community (and outside of the community). See below for an incredible find in a 16<sup>th</sup> century colonial settlement on the Ashley River. Keep posting the rocks you find/hide - we love to see them!

🌟 Greetings from South Carolina!

I found this cutie at what remains of a 16th-century colonial settlement that is located on the Ashley River, a major contributing route of trade even now, but much more so in colonial days.

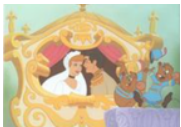
It has now traveled down the Ashley to where it meets the Cooper River downtown Charleston, in the hopes that it is found by someone who will help it on its journey to educate & tell its story.

As a medic, I couldn't agree more that awareness is essential and teaching each other how to empathize with one another is the only compassionate way forward. (It also gave me an edge on perfect rock-hiding placement, so just know that God is on y'all's side!)



### Challenge:

9 aphasia rocks are hidden in this newsletter. Can you find them all?



## Research Highlight: Cinderella in Aphasia Research

DR. LAURA GIGLIO

Discourse tasks like Cinderella are extremely valuable in aphasia research. They provide information on word naming, grammar, and types of speech errors.

### What we wanted to know: Which brain regions are important for improvement in discourse after naming treatment?

For each instance of Cinderella retelling, we calculated how many words were said, how complex the sentence structure was, and how many errors were made.

We then linked each participant's measures to their lesions, identifying brain areas that are related to less improvement if lesioned.

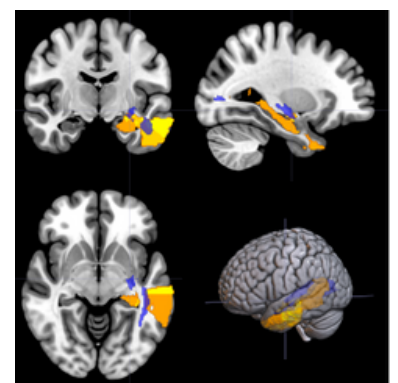
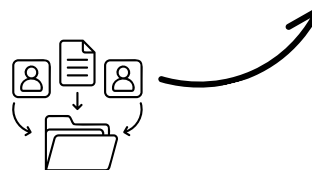


Figure 1: Brain regions related to an increase in the production of verbs after phonological treatment.

**We found that there was less improvement after treatment with lesions in the hippocampus in the medial temporal lobe.**

### Key Takeaways!

- The Hippocampus is critical for improvement in spontaneous discourse after naming treatment.
- Future directions: try to find ways to engage the hippocampus in the non-lesioned hemisphere.

## Sharing Simple Recipes!



### Strawberry Yogurt Parfait



1/2 cup plain greek yogurt  
(or any yogurt you like)



1 cup fresh strawberries (sliced)



1 tsp or drizzle of honey



Sprinkle of granola or chopped nuts



OPTIONAL: Add chia seeds for extra  
fiber and omega-3s.



Add ingredients to a  
preferred serving dish  
(bowl, mason jar, etc)  
and enjoy!



### Helpful kitchen tools to safely cut fruit



**T-shaped  
rocker knife**



**Adaptive  
cutting board**



**Food slicers**



Strawberries are rich in vitamin C & powerful antioxidants, which can help lower the risk of major health issues such as cancer, diabetes, stroke, and heart disease.

## Congratulations

Cheers to our Graduate Students as they move on to their next adventure! They have a bright future ahead as SLPs! Check out where they are heading to next:



**Gillian Bowman**

Inspire Speech and  
Feeding; Lexington, SC



**Marisa Binkley**

Home Health;  
Austin, TX



**Miya Morrison**

Inspire Speech and  
Feeding; Lexington, SC



**Emma Sells**

East Cooper Medical  
Center; Charleston, SC



**Melanie Semcesen**

Atrium Health-Mercy;  
Charlotte, NC



**Laura Oliver**

United Ability;  
Birmingham, AL



**Veronica Snell**

Atrium Carolinas Medical  
Center; Charlotte, NC





## The USC Aphasia Lab

Communication Sciences and Disorders  
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GOOD  
THINGS  
AHEAD



Stay tuned for a potential event at Segra Park!



Monthly LUNCH BUNCH!  
email Lauren Hammond at [LMH17@email.sc.edu](mailto:LMH17@email.sc.edu) to be added to our email list



JUNE is Aphasia Awareness Month!  
Let's spread aphasia awareness together!

## Study & Ambassador Opportunities!

<https://tinyurl.com/StudiesandPrograms>



**Facebook**  
[Aphasia Lab- USC](#)



**Instagram**  
[@uofscaphasialab](#)



<https://tinyurl.com/Aphasia-Lab-YouTube>



<https://tinyurl.com/Awareness-Video-Series>