



# Weather Changes

**A Conversation with CBS' Mark McEwen on life after a stroke, battling the bulge and his second act.**

By Linda Villarosa

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**May 12, 2008**--From 1987 to 2002, Mark McEwen was the face of CBS morning television. The warm, roly-poly McEwen, with his big moustache and bigger smile, made a perfect television weatherman. His sunny disposition and first-thing-in-the-morning cheer were nice to wake up to.

But two years ago, as he puts it, "there was a change in the weather." While visiting family in Baltimore, the then-51-year-old McEwen suffered a minor stroke that was misdiagnosed as the flu. Two days later, flying back home to Orlando where he was anchoring the news for the local CBS affiliate, he suffered a massive stroke. It almost killed him. When his eyes fluttered open in what was then called Orlando Regional Sand Lake Hospital, he was unable to talk, swallow or move half of his body.

In his new book, "Change in the Weather: Life After Stroke" (written with Daniel Paisner and published on May 1st by Gotham Books), McEwen details the harrowing events surrounding his stroke as well as his inspiring, ongoing recovery. Though he sometimes tires quickly, his speech is still halting and his right hand shakes enough to interfere with his golf game, McEwen says he refuses to be defined by his stroke. He's too busy living.

*The Root* caught up with him in Chicago recently as he kicked off the first leg of his book tour:

**Before you had your stroke, how much did you know about the disease?**

Zero, zilch—not a thing. The mother of my best friend had had a stroke, but she was an older woman. I felt bad for her, but it didn't have anything to do with me.

**You were pretty young for a stroke. Did you have any other risk factors?**

Yes, I had high blood pressure that I was taking medication for. But I had no idea that it had anything to do with stroke. In fact, I didn't think it was a big deal at all. I assumed everyone who worked in TV news had high blood pressure! Also, being a black man raised my risk. I now know that black people are twice as likely as Caucasians to have a first stroke.

**What about your weight?**

I wasn't quite obese, but I could stand to lose a couple of pounds. I'm almost six feet tall, and before the stroke I had gotten up to nearly 300 pounds.

I had a false sense of security about my size and what I ate. My thinking was, "Bad things happen to other people; they don't happen to me." So basically, I ate whatever I wanted. Eating a whole pizza was no big deal, and I always had dessert. When I lived in Manhattan, I'd grab whatever menu and order takeout without thinking. I went to the gym and jogged now and then, but only in fits and starts. Nothing consistent.

**When you were having the stroke, what did it feel like?**

When the plane started its descent, I suddenly found I couldn't talk. I tried to move, to reposition myself in my seat to get more comfortable, but my muscles wouldn't respond. It was as if I was paralyzed, and it was a terrifying realization. I closed my eyes and hoped I was having a bad dream, but when I opened them, I saw it was no dream. I was right there in my seat, confused and disoriented and unable to move or even communicate. I was there and not there all at once.

**What's been the hardest part of your rehabilitation?**

Coming back after a stroke is *all* very hard. When it first happened, I had no idea how bad it was. I thought I'd wake up from this and everything would be the same. If I had known what bad shape I was in and what it would take to come back, I would've been even more scared.

Right after my stroke, it was very difficult to be so dependent on other people. It was also hard when inside, in your mind, you feel like you can do everything. I would try and do things, but my body wouldn't respond. It was a struggle to learn to speak again. My voice is coming around, but in the beginning, I talked very slowly and sounded like Betty Boop on helium!

**How did you get through it?**

I'm blessed with a good disposition. I'm not a kind of woe-is-me, depressive person. That was never my mind-set. My parents taught me that when there's an obstacle, don't go around it; go through it. I treated rehab like work, right down to the uniform—shorts and a T-shirt every day. I also have had a lot of support, particularly my wife, Denise, who's my main caregiver. My motto really is slow and steady wins the race. In rehab from a stroke, it has to be.

**How has your lifestyle changed?**

I learned that I couldn't stay on the same train that brought me to the stroke, so I made a complete lifestyle change. I've lost 40 pounds. I feel good that now *after* a stroke, people tell me I look good!

I used to eat anything—and everything—but now there are plenty of things I walk right by. Within a five-mile radius of my house there's a McDonald's, a Burger King, a Taco Bell and an Arby's. The old me thought nothing about pulling in for a quick bite or a between-meal snack. Now if I see a drive-thru, I do a drive-by!

I eat chicken, turkey and fish and lots of fruits and vegetables. I limit my sugar and salt intake and stay away from fried food. I switched to soy milk, "butter" made from canola oil, tofu, veggie burgers and whole grain cereals.

**Exercise?**

All the time. I go to the gym just about every day. When I first got back on the treadmill, I could make it about 20 minutes, and I was very winded. Now it's an hour. I also go to a personal trainer twice a week for strength training. This exercise thing, I'm surprised at how easily it's become part of my daily routine. It's turned into something I miss when I don't do it. It's as natural as breathing or drinking water.

**What else did you learn from this experience?**

To take control of my health. I was taught to always believe the doctor. He knows what he's talking about. My thinking was, I know TV but not health and medicine. But it was a doctor who misdiagnosed my first, smaller stroke as the flu. If I had known it was a stroke—that could lead to a massive stroke—I never would've gotten on another plane. Being misdiagnosed put me on a quest to learn about health and taking care of myself and to question the doctor rather than simply listen to whatever I'm told.

**You had a brush with death. Are you afraid of another stroke?**

Not long ago I said to my wife, "You know, I don't fear death anymore. I've been there." I don't want to live in fear. I have things to do. I'm on television, doing PSAs for a show in Orlando called "Good Neighbor 6," and I hope to continue getting back into television.

F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, "There are no second acts." I don't agree. My second act is speaking out on behalf of stroke survivors and helping people who are prone to stroke, people like me, to be healthier.

*Linda Villarosa is a Brooklyn-based health writer and author of the book, "Body & Soul: The Black Women's Guide to Physical Health and Emotional Well-being". Her first novel, "Passing for Black", will be published next month.*

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