

A woman with brown hair, wearing a black lace top and a heart-shaped pendant, sits at a white grand piano. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. Her hands are resting on the keys. A sheet of music is open on the piano's music stand. The piano has a gold-colored frame. In the background, there is a window with blinds, a framed picture of a man, and a small statue on a shelf.

TRAUMA AND STROKE

A New Voice

You couldn't blame MaryAnn "Mare" Anselmo if she felt despair following a horrific car accident in March 2012 that left her in Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital's (RWJ) Surgical Intensive Care Unit with multiple, life-threatening injuries.

When Ms. Anselmo's life-changing accident happened, she was grieving the tragic death of her only son just weeks prior. A professional jazz singer, Ms. Anselmo had recently completed a CD and was planning a tour. Despite her painful loss, she was determined to move forward when a trip to her favorite bagel shop turned into a nightmare. Out of nowhere, a car jumped the curb, careening toward her vehicle. The impact moved her seat nearly three feet. First responders needed the jaws of life to remove her from the car before she was airlifted to RWJ, where its Level I Trauma Center team stood ready to save her life.

Due to the severe impact, Ms. Anselmo suffered two collapsed lungs, a lacerated liver, a shattered pelvis, several broken ribs and tears in her carotid artery.

"When she arrived, her blood pressure was dangerously low- she was crashing," explains Hesham Ahmed, MD, Assistant Professor of Surgery at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. "We gave her multiple blood transfusions and fluids and intubated her to aid her breathing."

Once doctors stabilized Ms. Anselmo, they induced a coma to reduce stress on her body to give her injuries time to heal. In addition to these challenges, Ms. Anselmo suffered several strokes caused by blood clots which resulted from the damage to her carotid artery.

James McKinney, MD, Assistant Professor of Neurology at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and Medical

Director of the Comprehensive Stroke Center at RWJ, managed the blood clots by using the blood thinner Coumadin.

"She was on Coumadin for three months, which gave her blood vessels and artery a chance to heal," Dr. McKinney explained. "It's inspiring to see someone who experienced such a traumatic event get back to her life's work."

Both Dr. McKinney and Dr. Ahmed believe the Aberdeen Fire and Rescue Company's decision to send Ms. Anselmo to a Level I Trauma Center saved her life.

"Our trauma team, and the hospital as a whole, was crucial to her survival," Dr. McKinney noted. "There aren't many places where you have multiple, skilled specialists collaborating to achieve the best outcome for a patient."

Dr. Ahmed added, "In this case, you had specialists from Trauma, Vascular Surgery, Interventional Radiology and Nursing working together to achieve an optimal outcome."

Ms. Anselmo remained at RWJ for five weeks and went to a physical rehabilitation facility for another six weeks before returning home. "I didn't know if I would walk, talk, or sing again," Ms. Anselmo explained.

Gradually, her injuries healed and she began rehabilitation with a personal trainer - a neighbor who donated his time to help Ms. Anselmo get back on her feet.



Shown above: Members of RWJ's Comprehensive Stroke Center worked with the Level I Trauma Center team, Nursing and Interventional Radiology to return MaryAnn Anselmo to health.

"Miraculous things come in many forms, allowing you to crawl out from under the rubble and to fly above it," Ms. Anselmo explained. "Yes, I've been tested by God, both emotionally and physically, but I'm alive for a reason. I went through a period of despair but I'm writing songs now and painting again for the first time in 38 years. I am living proof that music and art save lives." "After reading a story about singer Melody Gardot's near fatal accident, she also turned to songwriting and singing to aid her recovery. "Thank you, Melody, for inspiring me!" Ms. Anselmo said.

Ms. Anselmo is currently working with a vocal coach to heal the damage done to her vocal cords from the breathing and feeding tubes that helped keep her alive.

Now, she wants to perform a benefit concert at RWJ to launch "The Bungalow" a non-profit foundation with her husband, Joseph, to help individuals suffering from mental illness heal through creativity.

"I'd like to share the lessons I've learned to help others," Ms. Anselmo noted.

Visit www.rwjuh.edu/stroke;
www.rwjtrauma.org or
call 1-888-MD-RWJUH.