

History of Bill Pitts and the Cleveland Stroke Club, part 1

Bill was born in Big Sandy Tennessee on November 10, 1919. He was the eldest of six children, three brothers and two sisters. If you know Bill, than you know that he has a habit of always arriving early for every event; so, it is no surprise that he was born premature. His parents along with the doctor that brought him into this world did not think he would survive (let alone thrive). Consequently, his birth certificate read, *baby boy Pitts*. It was not until 1991 that his first and middle name were finally added to the record of birth.

The family moved to West Virginia where his father was a train conductor for a steel mill. His father became disabled and died at the young age of forty-eight due to his pervious exposure to chemicals while serving in the war. Bill's mother was a homemaker and lived to be ninety-one years old. Bill's brother, John (deceased) is credited with teaching Bill the fine art of swearing. Bill's creative use of language did not go unnoticed and his mother showed her appreciation by giving Bill a healthy dose of hot pepper on his tongue. When asked to describe himself as a child, Bill replied, "I was a skinny runt of a kid, but I was honest."

Bill's family moved to Cleveland while he was in his mid-teens and Bill joined the Civilian Conservation Corp in Zenia, Ohio. At age seventeen, Bill left home and went to California, where he attended classes until he was old enough (18 years) to join the Marine Corp. Bill proudly states that becoming a marine was one of his largest and most significant life changing experiences. Bill attained the rank of Master Sergeant E-8. He was the third Marine to ever earn the E-8 pay grade. Another interesting fact is that Bill also placed third in a nationwide Marine Corp Instructor contest. Bill served twenty years of active and ten years of Reserve duty.

Deciding to resign from active duty was very difficult and frightening for Bill. He consulted with Sam, a Lieutenant friend. He understood that Bill needed to decide to either stay with what he knew (being a Marine) or return to Cleveland and pursue a college education. Sam's advice came to Bill in the form of a story about a turtle. Now, we all know that in order for a turtle to get anywhere, it must first stick its neck out, which is truly a risky action. Bill decided to retire, and before shipping out to come home, Sam presented Bill with a box along with instructions not to open it until he had cleared land. Bill followed Sam's instructions and upon opening the box, he spied a little wooden turtle with a tag that read, "Never forget".

Bill earned his Master's degree in Speech Pathology from Case Western Reserve in 1965. He went on to take a job at Highland View Hospital (later merged with Metro Hospital) where he became the Director of the Speech and Language Department. After 20 years (1987) he retired. On December 28, 1968 Bill and Gerri exchanged wedding vows and at the very moment that Gerri said, "I do" Bill experienced the happiest moment of his life. Early on when they began to date, Gerri touched his soul and stole his heart when she presented him with a blue sweater that she had knitted for him. Bill recalls feeling an overwhelming sense of awe as his heart began a pitter-patter rhythm that continues to this day.

Together Bill and Geri keep busy enjoying their five children, ten grandchildren, nine great-grandchildren, and two great-great grandchildren. Currently they share their home with their daughter, Adrienne, grandson Tino and granddaughter Alex. There is certainly never a dull moment in the Pitts' household.

In 1974, while working at Highland View Hospital, Bill began the Cleveland Stroke Club. This was no small feat and he worked hard to establish a strong foundation and focus on which the Club would develop. The success of the Club is a testament to his dedication, organization and determination. Menninger once wrote "that the six essential qualities that are key to success are sincerity, personal integrity, humility, courtesy, wisdom and charity." Those are the qualities that our Founder William Milton Pitts possesses and they serve as the cornerstone on which the Cleveland Stroke Club will continue to flourish.

Bill has so many hobbies and interest: martinis, turtles, cribbage, chess, poetry, music, carpentry, Aphasia Products, Pittstop Productions, and of course, the Cleveland Stroke Club. At present, Bill is hoping to be invited to South Africa to accompany and demonstrate a software speech therapy program that he developed for individuals with aphasia. In closing, Bill states that life is a great teacher, and what he has learned from life is to "**Enjoy It**".

Gerri, Bill's wife, who is also an accomplished Speech Therapist is currently the Executive Director of the Cleveland Stroke Club.

