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Ingenuity and Willpower: Tools for a Roosevelt Stroke Survivor's Reinvention
EDISON – Two years ago, life as Theresa Kilijansk knew it changed when a stroke robbed her dominant right hand of all function.

The once mundane daily activities, like dressing, writing, eating and cooking, suddenly became a struggle and in some cases, an insurmountable obstacle for Kilijansk, now 85 years old.



That was about the time, she sought the skilled-nursing services of Roosevelt Care Center in Edison. It's also when she first stumbled across the facility's knitting group, a resident favorite at the long-term and subacute care center, operated by the Middlesex County Improvement Authority.

"I grew up with it," Kilijansk said of her crocheting, relating fond memories of her sons, to whom she regularly gifted homespun sweaters from their youth on up.

Almost immediately, the knitting group's organizer, Diane Toni, a Roosevelt volunteer and licensed crocheting instructor, recognized the challenges Kilijansk faced with her physical limitations.

She quickly sprang to action, or rather invention.

Putting her creativity to good use, Toni concocted a simple design in which a stationary crocheting needle extends from a wool-wrapped Styrofoam block.

Gripping the block with her knees and with the sole use of her left hand, in only a few months Kilijansk began to weave an assortment of creations from her bundles of yarn.

From behind a humble smile, a soft-spoken Kilijansk says, "It's slow going."

She displays daily her latest inspirational textile: a portable pouch and unassuming nook for snacks loosely fastened to her wheelchair.

With a bit of ingenuity and a lot of willpower, Kilijansk reclaimed her craft and a little independence all at the same time, Roosevelt officials praised.

“People’s ability to adapt and overcome adversity is a remarkable trait,” said Dr. Frank Damiani, administrator and clinical director for Roosevelt Care Center in Edison. “Theresa is a prime example. Like many of our residents here at Roosevelt, she’s reinventing herself in a new and positive way.” As for Kiljansk, she easily summed up her take on navigating life with a disability.

“You just try to do your best and you don’t give up,” she said. “You have to learn to do things for yourself.”

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