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[Back to Search Results](#) | [Printer Friendly Version](#)

### Daily News-Record (Harrisonburg, VA)

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Page: B1

## Against All Odds

### Stroke Survivor Tells Story Of Recovery

NATE DELESLINE III, Daily News-Record

BRIDGEWATER - When New York musician Jason Crigler suffered a stroke and collapsed during a gig in 2004, family and friends feared the end was at hand for the talented 34-year-old musician and father-to-be.

But through perseverance and with his family's support, Crigler is alive and well today and still making music.

He and his sister, Marjorie Crigler, shared their story of loss and recovery with several hundred Bridgewater College students Tuesday night. They've been traveling the country for the last couple of years in hopes of inspiring others.

"It means a lot to hear from someone who can relate to what you're going through," he said.

Jason Crigler has performed with many artists, including Norah Jones, Suzanne Vega and Rufus Wainwright, and he's also composed music for advertising campaigns and the short film "Grand Street." His latest album, "The Music of Jason Crigler," was released in 2008.

More than 7 million people in the U.S. today are stroke survivors, according to the National Stroke Foundation. A stroke occurs when blood flow to the brain is interrupted, either by a clot or, as in Crigler's case, when a blood vessel in the brain bursts.

After more than a year of downtime and intensive therapy, his life has nearly returned to normal. He can walk, talk, play the guitar and play with his now 6-year-old daughter.

Responding to a question from the audience Tuesday, he said many doctors still view his story as outside of the norm, because many survivors never come close to regaining the functions they lose, if, that is, they survive the actual stroke.

'Pretty Crazy Stuff'

On Aug. 4, 2004, his wife, Monica, just happened to be in the audience of the Manhattan club he was playing when tragedy struck. At the hospital, a doctor told the family that Crigler's chances for survival were slim and even if he did make it, he probably wouldn't be the man his family remembered.

A blood vessel in his brain had burst, causing the stroke.

Marjorie Crigler began Tuesday's program by showing videos and photos of the family and her brother before and after the stroke. The group watched in silence as he struggled to move, speak and perform simple tasks after the injury.

"Pretty crazy stuff, huh?" he said. "For a year and a half, I don't remember anything."

In addition to the stroke, he developed additional maladies during his yearlong hospital stay - infections, weight loss, bed sores and seizures. Doctors placed him into an induced coma to help with the healing process.

Through it all, his family held out hope that the old Jason was still fighting to get out. An experience with The Beatles confirmed their suspicions.

One night, his pulse began racing, and his family and caretakers struggled to figure out what was wrong as he was still unable to speak, his voice stolen by the stroke.

Partly out of desperation, his sister said someone decided to play a Beatles album. Within minutes, his pulse went back to normal.

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Although he didn't say what album, Crigler speculated it was probably something mellow.

"I don't remember this happening at all, but I'm assuming if it was The Beatles, it was probably not 'Helter Skelter' or 'Twist and Shout,'" he joked.

#### Emotion Equals Recovery

Crigler said one of the most difficult things was missing his daughter Ellie's birth and experiencing her first year of life.

"This really caused me a lot of sadness, but actually the crazy thing about it was that it was good in a way because it was the first time I actually felt anything in over a year," he said.

The emotion, he added, was a sign that his mind was definitely recovering.

Relearning to handle the guitar also was a big challenge. His first string change, normally a brief, easy task for an experienced, able-bodied person, took him two hours.

Eve Bowman, a Bridgewater freshman from the Harrisonburg area, said Crigler's words resonated with her because she faced a similar experience with a family member. Bowman said seeing how his family stood by was the most inspiring element of the story.

Caitlyn Kitts of Winchester, another BC freshman, was impressed to see how much he had recovered.

"I was really expecting him to come in and still be sick," Kitts said.

After picking up his guitar and sharing a song, Crigler reminded everyone that when crisis comes, we have a choice in how we respond.

"Everybody in this room has an Aug. 4," he continued. "Whatever your particular date is ... that date can be a source of depression and suck the life out of you, or it can be a source of power. I'm choosing to take what happened to me and turn it into something positive."

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