

FRANCESCA FEDELI

SMILE AND KEEP UP THE FIGHT

A story of love and science



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THE MOVING STORY OF TWO PARENTS FACED WITH WHAT PARENTS FEAR THE MOST – THEIR CHILD’S ILLNESS – AND TURNING IT INTO AN AMAZING OPPORTUNITY.

“Four years ago, the shock. Mario, my newborn son, was diagnosed with a stroke. When did that happen? In the womb? During delivery? The questions remains unanswered to this day. Two, maybe three children in thousand suffer a stroke at birth . For Mario, it meant that forty per cent of the right hemisphere in his brain was «burnt out». Doctors told us he would probably never gain control of the left side of his body. All this was still in the realm of statistical probabilities. By now I’ve learned. Statistics only tell you what you cannot do.

What you can do, we discovered a little at a time: numberless physiotherapy sessions, both at home and at the hospital, and an experimental program to activate «mirror neurons». Still, it wasn’t enough. Because Mario wasn’t paying attention to his exercises. He was paying attention to us, his parents, so desperate to teach him how to do things on his own we’d forgotten to teach him how to be happy. So we changed perspective. If we wanted our son to do his best, we in turn had to give him the very best version of ourselves. So we got him involved in all the things we used to love before his illness: once more we started travelling, listening to music, reading, seeing our friends. And step by step, our son literally got himself back on his feet, and became the happy child he is today.

Ours is not the story of a miracle or a fairy-tale: it just proves what you can achieve through curiosity, courage, love and science. We should learn to look at what we have as a gift, and at what we lack as an opportunity.

WHEN TOLD AT TED, THE STORY OF MARIO WAS SEEN BY 800.000 PEOPLE, AND NOW IT’S BECOME KNOWN ALL OVER THE WORLD.

At nineteen months, Mario had never learned to walk or even crawl. One day he was sitting on the ground, in a campus quad, next to Roberto. He seemed content, so I just kept up the conversation I was having. Then, all of a sudden, something changed: Mario wasn’t sitting anymore. He was trying to stand up. His right hand was gripping Roberto’s trousers’ leg, his right foot was pushing the ground. He was holding on to his father for support, and Roberto had turned to stare at him, dumbfounded. I forgot to breathe until I saw him actually upright. Mario had resorted to every strong and trained part of his body, and managed to carry along his supposedly «dead» side.

«We have a duty to keep experimenting, collecting data, sharing results. We must make an effort, following the example of our little patients and their parents. Rarely have I seen women and men as suitable to the role of mothers and fathers..»

– excerpt from the Postface by GIACOMO RIZZOLATTI

“Francesca and Roberto, thank you so much for sharing your story, yourselves, and your beautiful son with us. Touching and inspiring. Thank you.”

– Amy Cuddy

RANCESCA FEDELI, her husband, Roberto D’Angelo, and their little son, Mario, are the founding members of Fight the Stroke, an association in support of young stroke patients. Their talk at TED Global 2013 has spread all over the world. They were TEDMED Ambassadors at the 2014 Live Event 2014, and promoters of HackMed, the first Italian Hackathon on medicine. With a professional experience in marketing and Corporate Social Responsibility, Francesca represented Italy to the United States as Eisenhower Fellow for Innovation in 2014. www.fightthestroke.org www.facebook.com/fightthestroke