We often think of fate as predetermined destiny or an event occurring outside of our control. In the fall of 2012, when Superstorm Sandy battered New Jersey, fate took hold of the lives of Porfirio (Porfi) Garcia and Lee Kimble. Porfi, who was living alone on the coast, felt it was safer to travel to Manhattan to stay with his partner Lee. That was when Porfi had a stroke – and Lee immediately rushed him to St. Luke’s Roosevelt Hospital for treatment. Had he not decided to join Lee in the city, Porfi would have been stranded in the midst of a devastating hurricane, his outcome uncertain.

Upon discharge from the hospital, Porfi was transferred to Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation in West Orange, NJ, for acute rehabilitation. He was grateful for the care and encouragement of his team of nurses, therapists, and other stroke rehabilitation specialists, led by physiatrist Mylan Lam, M.D. Although he was occasionally frustrated having to relearn daily tasks, Porfi remained positive and was buoyed by the support of friends and family.

Porfi continued his recovery through outpatient therapy at Kessler Institute and still schedules regular check-ups with Yekyung Kong, M.D. Immediately following Porfi’s “brain attack,” Lee began researching how best to care for his partner. He also gained great insight and strategies from the rehabilitation team and came to understand how crucial it is to work toward restoring pathways in the brain as soon as possible. Lee and Porfi also participated in Kessler Institute’s support group, where they learned about a program called Opportunity Project.

Located in Millburn, NJ, Opportunity Project helps brain injury survivors explore their strengths and abilities and transition to life ahead with as much independence as possible. The program runs a wide range of individual and group activities throughout the day, such as work assistance, music, cooking, and general therapy to build physical, cognitive, and social skills. Porfi benefited greatly from working with the program’s trained personnel and interacting with his peers, noting a marked improvement in function.

Today, Porfi’s daily motivation is to live life to the fullest. He relies on the practices he has learned over the years to be as independent, confident, and comfortable as possible. Both he and Lee praise New Jersey’s vast resources and accessible venues. Much like the storm that changed their lives forever, Porfi continues to be a force of nature, giving every day his best.
The trillions of bacteria that make up the “gut microbiome” do a lot more than help our bodies digest food. These bacteria promote healing, produce vitamins, and fight inflammation. There is growing interest in how the gut microbiome can be influenced by dietary choices.

Reducing inflammation in the body is especially important after a brain injury. Fruits like pineapple, strawberries, blueberries, oranges, and cherries as well as leafy greens like spinach, kale, and collards all help fight inflammation. Foods high in omega-3 fatty acids have been shown to improve cognition, increase neuroplasticity, and decrease risk of depression. Fatty fishes, flax seeds, walnuts, avocado, and chia seeds are all recommended sources.

Often discussed is the concept of brain foods, superfoods, and foods that promote brain health. The Mediterranean diet is a great example of a diet that is rich in antioxidants and healthy fats. This diet recommends consuming cold-pressed olive oil, vegetables (especially leafy greens), fruits, and whole grains during every meal. It also helps reduce free radicals, which can build up in cells and cause damage to other molecules, such as DNA, lipids, and protein; and enhances cognition and neurogenesis, the growth and development of nervous tissue.

**Assisting Patients with Choices**

Meanwhile, because traumatic brain injury (TBI) can trigger significant metabolic shifts, individuals with moderate-to-severe TBI may experience difficulty swallowing, a condition called dysphagia, and a subsequent inability to consume adequate nutrition by mouth.

To increase awareness of nutritional options and assist patients starting their journey back to health, the Food for Thought Initiative was born at Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation. It combines one-on-one education from a registered dietitian with the ability to order two different options of brain-healthy smoothies each day. The Green Goodness Smoothie, made with anti-inflammatory pineapple, hydrating cucumber, spinach, turmeric, and lemon juice, is available daily at lunchtime. The Berry Blast Smoothie is available daily for an afternoon snack made with Greek yogurt, antioxidant packed frozen berries, and flaxseed oil. As an additional option for patients unable to eat by mouth, a tube-feeding formula is available. It is plant-based, gluten-free, kosher, vegan, organic and non-GMO.

The final—and most exciting—component of this initiative involves participation in an occupational therapy and dietary co-led group. This group empowers patients to make their own brain-healthy smoothies while learning how each ingredient contributes to their well-being. Smoothies are an excellent choice, as the consistency can be easily modified for patients with dysphagia who require varying thicknesses. They can also be created and consumed within a 45-minute group session. These sessions are currently up and running at the Kessler Institute’s Chester campus and are coming soon to the Saddle Brook and West Orange, N.J. campuses.

Stay tuned for future offerings from this important initiative!