

Paralyzed Taunton mom leaves 'beautiful legacy' of opportunities for the disabled

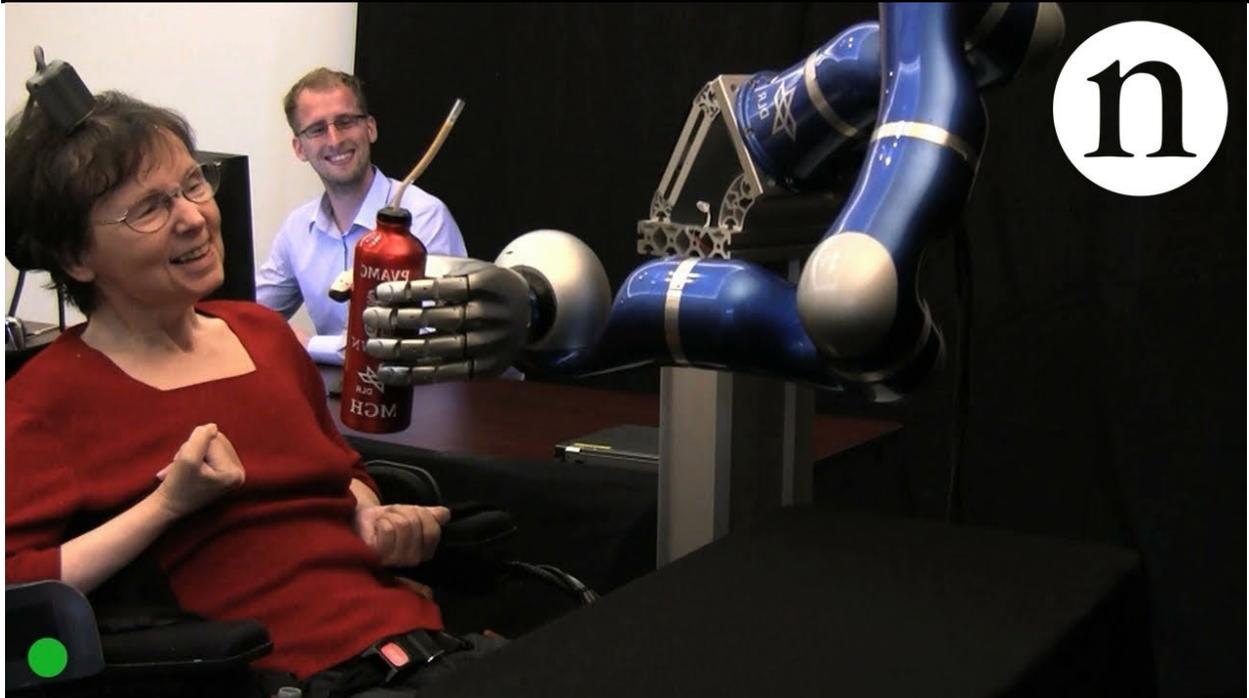
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TAUNTON — Holly Danca remembers how, before the stroke, her mom would hold the legs of the Thanksgiving turkey and make it dance before cooking it.

"She was the fun one in the neighborhood," said Danca, now 42.

A catastrophic brain-stem stroke left her mom, Cathy Hutchinson, quadriplegic and unable to speak. But Hutchinson's spark never faded, according to those who knew her. Appalled by the conditions endured at nursing homes by people with brain injuries, Hutchinson became a passionate and effective advocate for change.



Cathy Hutchinson, left, and her daughter, Holly, in 1990. This is before the stroke that would eventually leave Cathy Hutchinson paralyzed. *Courtesy Of Holly Danca*

"After the stroke, oddly enough, she was a little bit more relaxed," Danca said of her mother. "She didn't take herself so seriously. There was a shift in perspective on her life. Because she lost so much, she was more grateful, she lived more authentically."

Hutchinson died last year, but a class action lawsuit bearing her name drove improvements for more than a thousand Bay State residents living with brain injuries — and counting.

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A judge recently approved dismissal of Hutchinson v. Patrick, citing the significant reforms put in place as a result of the 2007 suit. All sides supported the judge's decision.

"She was focused on love and making the world a better place," Danca said. "I'm just so proud of her. I miss her so much. It's a beautiful legacy."



As a result of Hutchinson's activism, the state created a community-based services program that has allowed people with brain injuries to move from isolation in nursing homes to richer lives in community-based settings, according to Nicole Godaire, CEO of the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts.

"The system reforms achieved by this lawsuit have been nothing short of remarkable," Godaire said in a press release. "The impact of our collective work extends well beyond the 1,187 people who transitioned to community services in recent years to the many more individuals trying to rebuild their lives after a brain injury who have and will follow them."

A home on Precinct Street

Kathy Whipple is one of those individuals. Whipple met Hutchinson at a since-closed rehab facility in Middleboro before both of them moved to the bright, cheery group home on South Precinct Street in Taunton where Whipple still lives.

"I'm able to live in this house," Whipple said in a recent interview in the home's drawing room. "Living here I get to go out in the community. Living there I did not get to go out in the community."



Whipple, a 72-year-old Plymouth native who suffered a brain hemorrhage and a stroke in 2007, shares the home with four other people. They each have their own room and have licensed practical nurses on duty around the clock. There's transportation available for going shopping or visiting family. Whipple, for instance, gets to see her grandchildren in Mattapoisett.

Kathy Whipple, left, was a close friend of Cathy Hutchinson. Here, she holds a photo of Hutchinson with caregiver Stephanie Burnham at the Precinct Street group home Whipple once shared with Hutchinson.
Chris Helms

"When she had her mind on something," Whipple said, "stay out of her way."

Whipple recalls a time when Hutchinson tried to get her to print out and sign a document pretending to be Hutchinson's doctor. Whipple didn't do it, but she smiled broadly remembering how her friend fought for herself and others.



Cathy Hutchinson, right, and daughter Holly Danca at the White House as Hutchinson was honored as a White House Champion of Change in July 2015, on the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. *Courtesy Of Holly Danca*

Stephanie Burnham, a program manager at the Precinct Street group home run by [Brockton Area Multi-Services Inc.](#), has been helping residents there since 2012, including Whipple and Hutchinson.

Hutchinson could move only her neck. That limitation did not stop her from communicating.

Burnham recalls two methods they used. One was a pair of glasses with a dot in the center that allowed Hutchinson to control a mouse with her head. Another was a clear sheet of Plexiglas with alphabet stickers on it. Burnham would be on one side of the glass and follow Hutchinson's eyes as she spelled out words with them.

"Before this lawsuit there was no place like this for people who experienced those types of injuries," Burnham said. "It would be a nursing home. She was incredible in the situation she was in. It improved people's quality of life. She was a very inspiring woman."

Hutchinson forged several connections to Taunton in the years she lived here, her daughter said. She was active in St. Thomas Episcopal Church, where she had her own spot set aside each week. She also took classes at Bristol Community College.

New opportunities for the disabled

Hutchinson raised her daughter and son in Attleboro. Danca, Hutchinson's daughter, was a month from high school graduation and a week past her prom when her mom had her stroke. Hutchinson was 43.

"Our lives changed immediately," said Danca.

Danca's older brother, Brian, remembers how their mom had been sick in the weeks before the stroke. Her equilibrium was off, giving her trouble with movements like walking around the car.

"It was pretty traumatizing," said Hutchinson's son, who now lives in Plainville.

Brian Hutchinson also said he's proud of what his mom accomplished.

"They kept telling her no, no, no," he said. "There's a lot of people that she impacted directly and people she impacted indirectly."

Danca chokes up a little as she thinks about her mom's legacy, which included being honored by the White House as a "Champion of Change" and being featured on the CBS news magazine "60 Minutes."

"I feel in awe of all the things she's done," Danca said. "The world needs to know about the opportunities that are coming for the disabled."



Cathy Hutchinson, center, at a 2012 cookout with her daughter, Holly Danca, and son, Brian Hutchinson.
Courtesy Of Holly Danca