

Stroke survivors and their caregivers are gathering in Princeton, Illinois this weekend for Stroke Camp.

Stroke Camp is sponsored by OSF HealthCare Illinois Neurological Institute. It provides a safe place to gather with people who truly understand day-to-day life after a stroke event - both for the survivor and the caregiver.

65 year old Phil Bell suffered a stroke in January of 2012. Now the Macomb man's left arm and leg are paralyzed, and he suffers some cognitive impairments. According to Bell, surrounding himself with others who have gone through similar events is healing in itself.

"They have been where I am. Other people can say the sayings, but they don't know. These people know what it's like," said Bell. "You work hard all the time. Things I used to take for granted like talking and eating and drinking are now work."

For three days and two nights, campers get a weekend away from their everyday routine while they participate in everything from pampering and respite to support groups and crafts. Everything at Stroke Camp serves a purpose, down to the drum circle.

"The drum circle piece is an excellent example of how we show people – you can only be able to use your hand, perhaps, and you can still do something that's meaningful and makes you part of a group of people who share the same issues," said Maureen Mathews, Nurse Practitioner, OSF HealthCare Illinois Neurological Institute.

Stroke Camp is often an emotional weekend, but is also rejuvenating and empowering. Organizers hope participants go home with tools they can use to help with their journey to recovery – both physically and emotionally.

"All of those things help people when they go back home and they are trying to figure out the next step on their path, they have those memories to fall back on a bit, and they've also got some resources that they can tap into should they choose to do that," said Mathews.

The weekend is also designed as an outlet for caregivers. For many, taking care of a stroke survivor is a full-time job, and can seem scary, frustrating or lonely. Stroke camp is a way for these newly minted caregivers to support each other and create connections.

Bell's wife of 43 years, Nancy, is his caregiver. She says the connections made at Stroke Camp are invaluable, and these relationships help her feel like she isn't alone.

"I guess they kind of give a lot of hope during the year," said Nancy. "You don't see them, we're not communicating with them too much, but you know at least that someone else is going through the same thing that you are and there is kind of a comfort in that."

"When you go to camp and you have some time just with other caregivers to share your experiences, I think that brings people to tears," said Mathews. "Because finally, they get to let down and try to get rid of some of the junk they've been building up as they've been in a new role that they didn't really want to take on."

For more information about Stroke Camp, as well as links to online support and resources, visit StrokeCamp.org.