

Grasping at straws: one man's courageous battle with ALS

My husband, Mike Sands was diagnosed with ALS on March 7, 2011. He was a very active, athletic man working two jobs as a registered nurse. Mike stopped working the day of diagnosis and began his quest to conquer the effects of ALS. After the initial shock wore off, he fought back by changing his diet, exercising every day (he was running six minute miles two months after his diagnosis), by following a strict homeopathic program and having a stem cell procedure. These things helped, but his strongest ammunition already existed within himself; an unwavering faith, a very positive attitude, a wonderful sense of humor and courage and that is what inspired me to start my blog, "ALS with Courage" (alswithcourage.blogspot.com).

Mike has contributed to the blog and his great sense of humour and courage shows up in each of his stories. He writes about his great accomplishment of turning fifty in "Hawaii 5 Old". He tells about falling off his bike and breaking his nose in "My R Rated Blog" (gory pictures included) and he has our readers in stitches in "Fried Chicken Bucket List." I personally like his latest post the best, "Ahoy Matey."

The following is a blog post I wrote from November 2013. It paints

a picture of where Mike is at now on this journey with ALS. He remains content, determined and positive and he inspires thousands!

This is "Grasping at Straws:"

Clean teeth and fresh breath have always been very important to Mike. Before he gave up control of his oral hygiene routine, he brushed, flossed and rinsed with mouth wash a number of times a day. He carried dental floss with him in his pocket and kept some in the car. He would always take a step back when conversing with someone if he didn't think his breath was fresh. Same when I went in for a kiss, if he hadn't recently cleaned, he'd turn his head and give me his cheek.

I remember watching Mike brush his teeth with a hand that just wouldn't cooperate. He was losing the ability to hold his toothbrush and I knew he wasn't getting the cleaning he desired. But he kept doing the best he could and never gave up. He struggled for a while before I suggested I help. Without hesitation, he handed over his toothbrush. He didn't really have a choice; it was that or gingivitis. Plus, he was getting good at letting go.

Brushing Mike's teeth has become more and more of a challenge. He struggles to grip a straw



Mike, Nadine Sands and family. Christmas 2013

with his lips and draw water up to his mouth. It can take a really long time, but Mike likes to rinse well before and after brushing. So, with the same persistence he has had for so many other things, he keeps trying and doesn't give up. He is patient with himself. When water enters his mouth, he smiles a little. His lips unable to seal tightly, allow some water to dribble out. After he swishes the water around in his mouth the best he can, he loosens his lips and the water spills out and rolls down his chin and I catch it in a dish. And then he repeats the process. He

laughs at me sometimes, on my knees, I must look bored as I wait but really I'm intrigued at his determination. My arms get tired holding the cup in one hand and the dish in the other. He probably thinks "some fitness instructor you are." He used to say that to me when I would cruse around a parking lot looking for the closest spot. When he drove he always went straight to the back of the lot where there were lots of spots to park.

Anyway, Mike just never gives up. He doesn't quit. He has displayed the same constant determination

at every stage of this illness without fail. Maybe sometimes on the inside he is screaming "I can't take this anymore!", but on the outside he is composed, calm, okay. He has had to let go of almost everything, but he still perseveres, he is still determined. He was once a strong, fit, athletic man capable of so much. Now with all his might, he draws water up a straw.

Mike and I could not have made it this far without the support, love and prayers of family and friends and the inspiration of others battling this illness like our friends Neil and Donna Hemming.

What is ALS or Lou Gehrig's Disease?

Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) is a rapidly progressive, neuromuscular disease. It attacks the motor neurons that transmit electrical impulses from the brain to the voluntary muscles in the body. When they fail to receive messages, the muscles lose strength, atrophy and die.

ALS can strike anyone at anytime, regardless of age, gender, or ethnic origin. It does not affect the senses, and only rarely does it affect the mind. The equipment costs for each patient average \$137,000, while nursing and home care costs can be up to 10 times this amount.

The ALS Society of B.C. is dedicated to providing direct support to ALS patients, their families and caregivers, to ensure the best quality of life possible living with ALS. Through assisting research, we are committed to find the cause of, and cure for ALS.

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