

Lessons of life—and MS—passed from father to son



by James Speegle

My dad was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1935 when he was in his early 30s. Until then, his life was built around sports and physical fitness—in college he was a wrestler, a boxer and football player, and eventually became a college coach. When his legs gave way, he was afraid people would think he was drunk, so he would go out at night with canes and try to walk. He fell a lot, and his knees and elbows took a beating. But he was a fighter and no one or no thing was going to beat him. He found an outlet through sculpting, painting and playing the guitar. He founded the Rochester Area Multiple Sclerosis Society (RAMS) in upstate New York in the 1950s and through that introduced me to many heroic people who were fighting MS.

I was 68 when, one day, my right side began to go numb. Many doctors and tests later, I learned that I, too, had MS. I had my dad to thank for knowing I could find a way to live with it, and I relied on Suzanne, my partner and soul mate, for her love and positive outlook. Unlike Dad, though, I was no athlete, and didn't know exactly how I would work through this.

Suze and I moved shortly after that, and our new home was surrounded by woods. I became fascinated by wood and began to create sculptures and small structures. That is when I began to dream of building a log "lodge." I had never built anything before. I didn't know exactly why I wanted to start, except maybe this new creative spirit felt like a bond between me and Dad. Or maybe learning to live with MS had given me the urge to try something I had never attempted before.

How do you put a window in? Or put up rafters? It took many hours, but I could measure the

improvement and the speed with which I completed each task. It built my skills, but there were other challenges: The work tested the limits of my body. I could work only a few hours and then had to take every other day off to rest up.

And, oh yes ... I had to remember to just stop working for a moment and look around. Surrounded by green, lush beauty, I could breathe deeply and smell the earth and the fresh-cut wood.

Though I built the lodge several years ago, to my surprise and delight, it is still standing, and so am I! I'm still working with wood, and still enjoying the woods and my walks through them.

It is autumn now. The earth's rhythms have slowed and the leaves are changing color and slowly falling. Perhaps that is my rhythm also. But no matter. I have done what my dad did: I have loved deeply and enjoyed immensely.

James Speegle, PhD, and his partner, Suzanne Grenier, live in Bridgeville, Delaware. He was diagnosed with MS in 2007.

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