

The power of song



David Osmond relies on his relationships—and, with a new song, his music—to find strength and give back to the MS community.

by Andrea Sachs

It's no surprise that David Osmond—son of The Osmond Brothers founding member Alan Osmond, and nephew of the iconic entertainers Donny and Marie Osmond—became a performer. After all, he was introduced to show business before he even knew it was a business, joining his famous relatives on stage when he was only 4 years old. “I just assumed as a little boy that every kid’s dad does this—TV, tour buses, screaming fans,” he recalls.

Osmond, a Salt Lake City native, was enjoying his own successful career as a singer, producer and songwriter when, at age 26, he began experiencing alarming physical symptoms. The impact, he says, was sudden and devastating.

“It was Christmas Eve 2005. I remember coming home from a show around 2 a.m., taking my shoes off, and turning to my then-fiancée, Valerie, and saying, ‘Something’s wrong—my feet feel like they’re being crushed by a steam roller.’ It was like a painful numbness,” Osmond recalls.

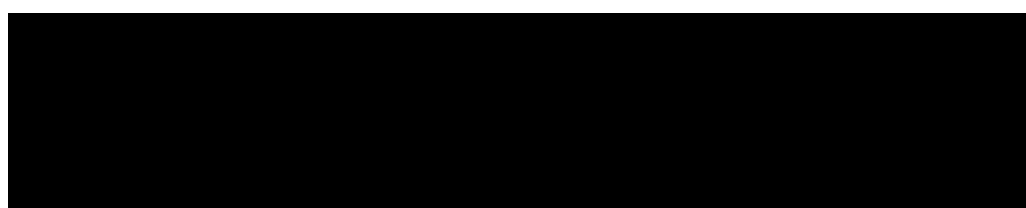
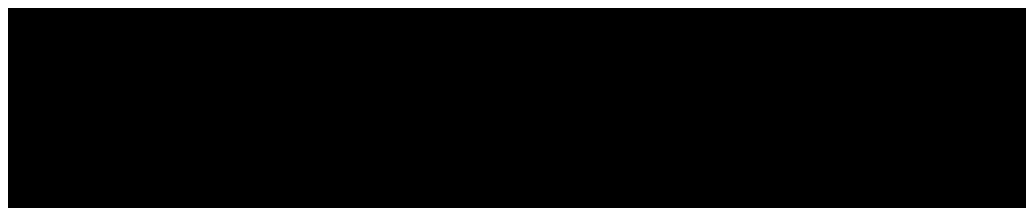
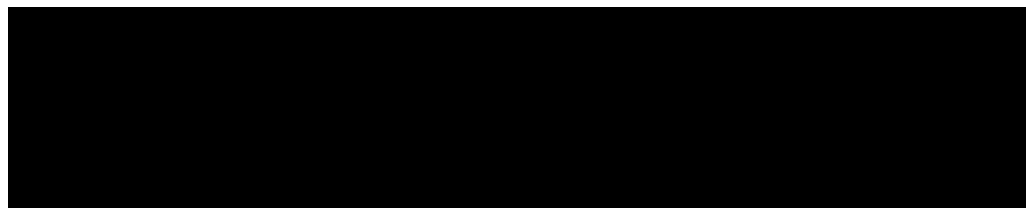
Within a week, the sensation had spread up his legs and to his chest. “I started tripping and falling and, before I knew it, I had to use a wheelchair just to function,” Osmond says. His eyesight began diminishing too. “It was like looking through static television,” he says.

The symptoms threatened to take a toll on his career. But Osmond tapped into what he calls

a determination that runs through his family. “My grandpa instilled this in my uncles and aunt: ‘You can do this, whatever it is. Keep fighting, keep going.’ ”

So, Osmond says, “Even when I couldn’t walk, if a client wanted me to perform, they would carry me on stage in the dark, then turn the lights on and I would perform.”

Months later, when Osmond’s doctors finally diagnosed him with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis, he could hardly believe it. Nearly 20 years before, his father had been diagnosed with MS. But David’s symptoms were quite different than the symptoms that his father, who has primary-progressive MS, had experienced. “My dad never had pain,” Osmond says. “This is not what I knew MS to be.”



He learned from his neurologist that his initial MS attack was very intense, causing numerous lesions on his brain and spinal cord. A strong course of steroid medications allowed him to regain much of his mobility, but after a couple months the steroids wore off and he went back to his wheelchair.

Osmond recalls the times when he was at his worst, needing Valerie to bathe him, or crawling by himself, army-style, to the bathroom. He felt sorry for himself and for his bride-to-be. “She doesn’t know what she’s in for,” he recalls thinking.

It was during this low period that Osmond had a powerful “eureka” moment. “I remember being in my wheelchair at my parents’ house, and I couldn’t even move,” he says. “And I was

watching my brother, from across the room, wrestle with his 1-year-old son. I looked over at Valerie and thought about the fact that we wanted to have a family too. And I didn't know if I would ever have that." At that moment, Osmond says he realized, "Wow, I need to do more! I need to do everything I can to make that possible for me some day."

A return to health

Osmond committed himself to a "massive reformation of my lifestyle," with exercise, dietary changes and close consultation with his doctors. After another dose of steroid medications, his mobility returned, and so did his ability to perform without physical assistance.

The changes were possible, he says, because of the support he received from Valerie, "my rock." The pair married in April 2007. "I walked down the aisle on my wedding day. And I never did have to go back to the chair," Osmond says. The couple's dream to start a family was also realized—their two daughters are now 4 and 5 years old, and their son was born in May.

Having children refocused the singer's determination to live well in spite of MS: "I thought, 'How can I not do everything possible now?'" That included reversing some prior decisions. Until that point, for example, Osmond had resisted taking a disease-modifying therapy. But now, he realized that it had to be part of his total approach to wellness. Channeling his grandfather's advice, Osmond thought, "I can do this."

Osmond also drew closer to the rest of his famously tight-knit family. He recalled his father's mantra: "I may have MS, but MS does not have me."

But father and son definitely have each other. "Now that I have MS, we have this extra bond, and we understand each other even more," Osmond says. "Every step I take, I feel my dad with me."

Building harmony

With his health, career and family on track, Osmond knew it was time to give back and get more involved in the MS community. So he did it the Osmond way: by building relationships, often through the power of music. For more than five years, he has spoken and performed at numerous National MS Society events, and has participated in Walk MS many times.

"I hope to educate and inspire others not to make the same mistakes I made," he says. "My biggest thing is just to say, 'Hey, find out what more you can do.' Go to your team, to the people you trust, and find out, 'What can I do?'"

Other people living with MS who have gotten to know him over the years have been drawn to Osmond and his positive energy. "We're not just part of each other's networks," says Brett Hales, a city councilman from Murray City, Utah. "We're also part of each other's families." Janice Dean, senior meteorologist at Fox News Channel, concurs. "He's very charismatic. You can be in a room of 300 people, but you feel like he's just connecting with you. That's very

rare.”

Osmond returns the compliment. “[People like Brett and Janice] inspire me in my journey with MS through their words and actions,” he says. “Others share their stories with me, and it helps me keep going, and realize I’m not alone in this. Now I just have so many more friends and family members.”

Last October, at age 35, Osmond teamed up with Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corp. on its “Our Voice in Song” outreach campaign. Riffing off his grandfather’s words, he wrote his latest tune, “I Can Do This,” for the campaign, in hopes his lyrics would inspire others living with MS. “We have made so many strides in the last five years alone; how could I not be hopeful? And the more noise we make together, the more advances we’re going to make,” Osmond says.

On a personal level, Osmond says MS still presents challenges. He has bladder issues and still has some pain and numbness in his legs. And if he pushes himself too far physically, he feels a crushing tightness—the so-called “MS hug”—in his torso.

As a result, he has learned to adjust his personal and professional life. “I know where my walls are, where my hurdles are, how far I can push myself,” he says. “If I’m on stage performing, I understand how to craft a show. There are moments where I may need to sit down and grab a guitar, so I’m off my feet for a little bit.” That way, says Osmond, “I can be at the top of my game to give the best show possible.”

After all, he’s still an Osmond. “Occasionally, I get a call from my Aunt Marie,” he says. “ ‘Hey, can you fill in for Donny?’ ”

Andrea Sachs is a New York City-based freelance writer. She was diagnosed with MS in 2009. Additional reporting by Laurie Budgar.

Learn more about [“Our Voice in Song.”](#)