

Stories of Hope: Patti O'Donnell Finds Her Way Back to School, One Step at a Time

By Debra Nelson-Hogan

Sixteen years ago, Patti O'Donnell was living a life firmly entrenched in education. Besides teaching science education at Kutztown University and coaching cross country and track at Lehigh University, she had begun work on her PhD. After track practice, she was hit in the head with a lacrosse ball, which caused a traumatic brain injury (TBI) and ultimately CRPS. As do others who develop CRPS and other chronic conditions, Patti's losses were substantial, including her marriage, athletic abilities, and her work. However, as she worked on reestablishing a life, she says, "Part of what kept me going was the long-term goal of finishing my PhD, and I took baby steps along the way. I didn't give up." Dr. Robert Knobler, Patti's neurologist, gave her hope and told her that some people did get well. She was determined to find her way back to school and teaching.

She found support in Lehigh County's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR). OVRs have been created to provide vocational rehabilitation services to help persons with disabilities prepare for, obtain, or keep their jobs. Initially, she was assigned a case worker who told her to come back after she had been out of the hospital for at least a year. "She wasn't very understanding," Patti says, who later returned to the OVR after the requisite year. Then she was assigned a more sympathetic case worker who helped her with the accommodations she needed in order to finish her degree. The key is not to give up after rejections but to try again using other tactics.

She initially made an appointment with the head of the OVR and took information from her physician regarding her personal challenges and the kinds of accommodation she might need. Patti was provided technical support and training through an assistive technology program at a rehabilitation hospital, and the OVR funded the equipment. "I couldn't type

and I needed a different type of screen and software. I was set up so that I could scan documents rather than type them. I also got an antigravity chair to help reduce pain while at my computer."

Patti also went to the University's disability specialist on campus to have them advocate for accommodations, such as additional time. In some cases, she was allowed to do independent studies, because physically she could not stay in class for more than one hour, and most classes lasted three hours. "I didn't have to fight with my teachers or administrators in order to get the work done without decompensating," she explains. Any university that receives federal funding has to have a disability office, Patti encourages people who have CRPS and are interested in going to college to contact them for help.

"As my health improved I was able to accomplish more, although there were some setbacks. I got an autoimmune disease, had an auto accident, and several surgeries which set me back; however, I did not give in to it. The last couple of years I have been fairly well at balancing and pacing my life so that my health remains well enough to continue working on my dissertation," she says.

In addition to the OVR, Patti discovered other resources that could help her, taking into consideration her income and her level of disability—she found the County Adult Services helpful in providing aides. Her insurance paid for some home health care and for physical and occupational therapy. Patti points out that you may have to do your own research to find out what services are available. She stresses not to get discouraged but to advocate for yourself and network to find all resources available. "All counties have adult services, and they will evaluate your needs and determine what they will pay. I own my home and I still qualified for home



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remission for several months. A new problem with my neck from one of the blocks started up. It turned out that there were several damaged vertebrae from a previous injury. Lucky for me, I was well connected with a team of surgeons from Orthopaedic Specialty Group in Fairfield, Connecticut, who also have an experienced CRPS doctor on their staff. They all wanted to avoid surgery but when the problem became acute, they said there was no other choice. Several months after neck surgery, I was back flying Stars & Stripes as well as providing Flight Instruction.

A year after neck surgery, I started to have problems with my shoulders. Every effort was made to avoid surgery because of the CRPS. However, one shoulder had a torn rotator cuff that required repair.

The other shoulder would not improve and also required surgery. Until this time, CRPS was isolated in my right lower arm and hand. Unfortunately, the first shoulder surgery precipitated the spread of the CRPS to both shoulders and both arms. A new type of long term block was used for the several shoulder surgeries and has proved very helpful in keeping the CRPS in almost total remission. Having a good attitude during these long term blocks was a must! They are intense, interrupt all daily activities, and of course precluded any flying.

A year later, now eight years of living with CRPS, it is still lurking and sometimes causing problems. There is burning on a daily basis and sometimes other CRPS manifestations such as swelling in my hand. If the CRPS flares up I curtail my activities and resume when it calms down. I don't think of

where CRPS is going to raise its ugly head next and try not to do anything that might cause an injury that could precipitate more CRPS. I don't limit my activities. Flying and flight instruction are still my passion and rarely a week goes by that I have not put in some flight hours. For the past three years, I have been flying a search and rescue helicopter throughout Connecticut and the surrounding states. The crew is on a 24/7 ready status to assist in locating lost people and boats as well as assisting police departments when needed for surveillance or providing lights from above on raids.

Having a good attitude really is what has gotten me through the CRPS experience in a way that I continue to deal with it and live my life to the fullest. ■

help. The County, and Liberty Resources, assigned me services for help with tasks that aggravated my symptoms, such as some cleaning activities, food shopping, organization, and rides to doctors. They even helped me find ways to eat healthier meals. For example, I found chopping vegetables very difficult, so I received special utensils to help me as well as an aide to help with food preparation. I worked with the aide to make well-balanced meals. It is great finding a support network beyond the family. For other tasks, such as shoveling snow or cutting grass, Patti contacted a consortium of churches, Share Care, that do these kinds of tasks for disabled people. "Look in the blue pages under Social Services. Social agencies are out there and they can help," she says. Going to support groups other than the CRPS group enabled me to find out about additional services.

Nearly two years ago, Patti found additional support in the form of Raven,

a black lab service dog. For example, she often fell and needed help keeping her balance, particularly first thing in the morning before she had taken her medication. Now, Raven takes the water from the refrigerator and brings it to her, so that she can take her medication before getting up. He also can help her open doors if she puts a strap around the handle. More importantly, he is trained to brace, so she can use him to get up if she has fallen. If leaning on him doesn't work, he will go find a phone for her. Generally it is her cell or land line, but once she fell in a public place and Raven returned with someone else's cell phone. Fortunately, the phone's owner was understanding.

He also picks up anything that she drops, including coins, paper money, keys, water bottles, and pens. Also, Patti says Raven is a very good traveler and helps her navigate through airports. On the plane, he curls up

in a ball and sleeps under the seat in front of her seat.

Raven came from the Susquehanna Service Dogs, an organization that specializes in non-traditional needs, such as chronic neurologic or spinal cord injuries. "They knew what CRPS was," she says. Her training class included people who had multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, spina bifida, and spinal cord injuries.

Patti takes Raven to school groups to teach and demonstrate a service dog's capabilities for helping with challenges. She has even spoken at University classes where students are training to work with people with disabilities. Her talks cover topics such as: TBI, nerve injuries, CRPS, and service dogs. These presentations help keep her in front of the classroom, at least until she finishes her doctorate. Right now, Patti is finishing her dissertation and expects to graduate in May 2010. ■