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Charity bike ride has personal meaning for Melanson

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Keith Melanson of Sherborn was at the post office last week buying hundreds of 37-cent stamps. Is he a tax accountant? Was he filing returns on behalf of his clients? Good guess, but no.

The stamps are for hundreds of personal letters he is sending out to colleagues and friends this week to announce his participation in "The Positive Spin for ALS," a cycling event and fund raiser happening on May 18 to benefit people with Lou Gehrig's disease.

Jill and Keith Melanson are active in philanthropy, supporting several charities. It's not surprising that he is putting time and energy behind such an event. But this is different than many of the charities he supports. This cause is personal. Keith's only brother, Ken, was diagnosed with ALS in June 2000.

Once an avid athlete and Boston University alum enjoying a highly successful career in financial services as VP for the Boston Company and later with Merrill Lynch, Ken now is bed-ridden and relies on a ventilator for his every breath. Ken is 42.

"ALS is an absolutely terrifying disease, not only to the man or woman diagnosed, but also to loved ones who have to watch the disease progress with its relentless brutality in someone they love," said Keith.

While ALS is a fatal diagnosis, and there is little Keith can do to help his brother on a day-to-day basis to physically fight the disease, he realizes he can help on a different front. As a managing director at Bear Stearns, which recently topped Fortune Magazine's list of the most admired securities firms in the industry, Keith Melanson understands both the power of information, and the advantage of influence.

He is using the same aggressive approach to building awareness of the disease that has wreaked havoc on his family that he has in managing his own successful career in the financial services industry. Over the past two years, he has raised more than \$40,000 for the Massachusetts chapter of the ALS Association though his participation in the Positive Spin for ALS.

Equally important as the money he raises is the awareness he fosters through his letters to his network of colleagues, friends and associates. By the time they have read the letters, they know the nature of ALS and its consequences.

"The thing about ALS is that it progresses so quickly, that patients and their families generally spend all their time, money and energy battling the disease," said Melanson. "Most doctors, therapists and insurance carriers have little experience with the disease, and so families need to spend their time and energy educating them. People peripheral to the immediate care are largely in the dark about what it's like to battle ALS day-to-day."

ALS is a fatal neuromuscular disease with no known cause or cure that paralyzes its victims, while leaving their mental capabilities intact. The life span for someone with ALS is between two to five years after diagnosis. ALS progresses and often takes adults in the prime of their lives. The average age of onset is 40-70, although it sometimes strikes adults as early as their late twenties.

Like Lou Gehrig, the most famous person identified to have suffered from ALS, healthy men and women in the prime of their lives are at risk for ALS. It does not discriminate - men and women of any socioeconomic, race or cultural background can be affected. Every 90 minutes in the U.S., an individual is diagnosed with the disease. Lou Gehrig

was just 37 years old when ALS took his life and his name.

"I think people get out their checkbooks when they get my letter because not only do they know this battle is incredibly personal and important to me, but I think they also say to themselves, 'Wow, this could have been me,'" said Melanson.

Ironically, this spring marks the 100th anniversary of Lou Gehrig's birth. In looking back over the last century, one shudders to think how many careers have been cut short, how many family lives have been destroyed, and how much potential has been lost by this disease. Keith knows this firsthand, all too well.

"Fund-raisers like Keith are invaluable," said Paul Tamburello, founder of the Positive Spin for ALS. "He is a consummate professional; he sets his goals and meets them without question. He's a man on a mission, and we appreciate every ounce of energy and every contact he has made on behalf of the cause."

Not only will Keith raise money, but he will also lead cyclists participating in the 50-mile ride named for his brother. He'll use the same bike he rode when he and Ken first began doing 60-80 mile rides to the North Shore beaches when they were younger.

"I guess I'm a hopeless nostalgic," said Melanson. "I have state-of-the-art equipment for every other sport I participate in, but this 21-year-old bike has a very special place in my heart, and it will carry me and my fond memories of riding with Ken every foot of the 50-mile ride I'll do in his honor."

To learn more about ALS or the Positive Spin for ALS, visit www.positivespinforals.org or e-mail Keith Melanson at kmelanson@bear.com.