

Louisville Man Overcomes Rare Disease Returns to Work at OSP

by Laurie Huffman, *The Review*

Scott Rike says becoming a state highway patrolman was not a career choice, it was a life choice and—along with support from his family and his faith—that decision may have saved his life.

He was struck with a very rare, extremely painful, and debilitating disease called scleroderma, which he has struggled with since October 2005, and which almost took his life. He became totally beaten down by the illness and at one point, he says he actually accepted the fact that he was going to die. But his drive and determination, his faith, and the love of his family has helped him rise up and heal to the point where he will actually be going back to work at the Ohio State Highway Patrol this Friday.

“I just got the word from Col. Richard Collins, superintendent of the OSHP today,” Rike announced last Wednesday with a huge smile.

Scleroderma is an autoimmune disease that makes the body create too much collagen. This excess turns into scar tissue and the skin becomes hard and dark. It can also eventually harden the heart, kidney, and lung

tissue.

Only one in 200,000 people a year are diagnosed and only one in 300,000 of those people are men.

“The nurses had never heard of it,” Rike said, “and the doctors knew what it was but had never actually treated anyone with it.”

Rike first went to the doctor when his fingers turned purple and became painful. He proceeded to do a lot of research on the Internet while he was waiting for his symptoms to be diagnosed and he actually suggested scleroderma to the doctor himself. His family physician in Massillon, Dr. Lito Belardo, agreed that may be what he was afflicted with and did some blood tests. Nothing showed in the tests. Shortly afterward, his breathing started becoming a problem, even though he had never smoked and had run 4–5 miles each day for years to keep fit.

“The Ohio State Highway Patrol requires you to keep in excellent shape,” Rike informed. “They weigh everyone in each month and everyone has to take physicals and stay in their best shape.

“I had to leave work at that time, and the OSHP means everything to me. So being off work was

devastating to me.”

Rike was sent to a specialist at the Cleveland Clinic and the disease finally showed up in the blood tests they took there. He was placed on prednisone and sent home.

“He was hospitalized so many times during the past two years we’ve lost count,” Rike’s wife, Tami, said. “He went into the emergency room a few times before he was diagnosed and he has been in and out of the hospital many times since then.”

Rike said his illness got suddenly worse again and the “pain was unbelievable.” His heart rate was elevated to 175 and they couldn’t get it down due to his lungs being so inflamed by the disease. He was put on a very toxic form of chemotherapy at that time, and had to drink a gallon of water each day just to keep his bladder from being damaged.

“I had teams of lung, heart, vascular, and autoimmune specialists working on me,” Rike said. “The best specialists in the world.”

Tami was also pregnant at the same time, and sadly, in the middle of this crisis, she also lost their child.

Rike said the depression he was in by that time was almost worse than the disease. “I would start crying just out of nowhere,” he said. My only glimmer of hope had been the birth of our child that was coming. Then, at her

said without a lung transplant he had no hope to live beyond another three months.

“That was the turning point in my life. I turned everything over to Christ. I know that sounds cliché but in that situation, that’s what you do. Then things started to turn out better for me.”

Rike went into lung therapy and his father and Tami encouraged him to get up and walk every day. His mother was also always by his side when things got tough, he said, even when she had to drive 100 miles each way to see him in the hospital in Cleveland.

“I decided I was going to return to the Ohio State Highway Patrol and I knew I had five years to do it before they would no longer allow me to come back,” he indicated. “People told me I would never be able to return to work but I didn’t believe them. I had a goal. I wanted to go back and I’m a goal-oriented person.”

Rike said he literally limped to the YMCA and began lifting weights again. He could only lift 20 pounds, compared to the 320 he used to bench, but he didn’t let that deter him.

From February to mid-March, the doctors began to see some improvement and they took him off the lung transplant list. He began walking on a treadmill 30 minutes a day, which he said was “real hard” because he

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– Scott Rike

20-week ultrasound we had the biggest slap in the face when they told us the baby had died. The depression just came in then like a dump truck. I didn’t care anymore if I lived or died.

“I’m a Christian and I would never take my own life but I had to retire from my work also at that time and that was really crushing to my soul.

A Turning Point

“I was dealing with financial crises, the loss of a child, and I knew I was going to die,” he said. “Last fall I went to counseling for a couple of hours and I had to leave. It wasn’t helping me. I knew I had to deal with it myself.”

Rike could not even get up on his own by then and his lungs had gotten so inflamed and scarred the doctors

couldn’t always see the amount of progress he wanted to see.

From March to July, his lungs improved almost 45 percent, and the doctors had no answers for it. “It was so uncommon for them to see this kind of recovery,” Rike said.

He took a job at FirstMerit in Akron at that time as a loan officer, where he worked with retired Akron police officers. Rike reports having a daily schedule helped get him back on track and says his new friends there gave him tremendous support.

He went off the chemotherapy and his skin returned back to normal. “I’ll never have the wind power I used to

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Tami and Scott Rike

Photo by Kevin Graff

have,” he said, “but I’m trying to increase the capacity as much as possible. I can’t run more than two miles a day now either but I do that much each day and I lift weights.”

Rike said this situation was not only hard on him but also on his wife. He said he feels bad for the stress he caused her at a time when she had lost her father and their child and was facing losing him, too.

A turning point

The Rike home is filled to the brim with happiness at this point in time, however, and both Rike and his wife can’t stop smiling. The disease could re-manifest at any time, Rike indicated, but says it’s not that likely.

He feels it’s important to give back when you’ve been given a second chance, so he has volunteered to speak at a scleroderma support group meeting at 6:30 in the evening on Sept. 25 at the Malvern United Methodist Church, located at 121 W. Wood Street.

“In my time as a state trooper, I have arrested and fought some of the meanest, most horrible people possible,” Rike admitted. “But to this day, scleroderma was the toughest criminal I have fought.

“I decided to do this interview because if one person reads this that has cancer, or anything serious, I want them to know you can beat it. If you have the right attitude, you can beat anything in life.”

Note: This story was reprinted with permission from the Alliance Review (OH) newspaper.



SAVE THE DATE July 25-27 2008 NATIONAL CONFERENCE!

California, Here We Come!

The Scleroderma Foundation and its Southern California Chapter are pleased to announce that the 2008 National Conference will be held July 25-27 in Manhattan Beach, Calif. The Manhattan Beach Marriott will serve as the host hotel.

The Foundation is also excited to report that Cindy Coney, who led the “Maximizing Life, Minimizing Stress” workshop at the 2007 Conference, will serve as opening keynote speaker. A person living with lupus, Coney, who also serves on the Lupus Foundation of America board, is a dynamic and humorous speaker. She received rave reviews following her 2007 conference workshop.



Cindy Coney

Please save these dates on your calendar. We will release details on the conference once they are finalized. Check our Web site at www.scleroderma.org and click on National Conference from the Quick Links dropdown for conference updates.