THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

An Ironman Competes to Give Back

Dr. James Barron never took physical fitness seriously until age 30, when he served as the physician for a Marine battalion, but he'd always been intrigued by watching Ironman competitions on television—grueling events that consist of a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride, and a 26-mile run.

"In my mind I would think 'boy, wouldn't it be great to do that some day?'" said Dr. Barron, a 44-year-old internist from Grand Rapids, Mich.

The motivator for his will to ultimately become an Ironman-level triathlete came from a painful life event: the September 2001 death of his 5-year-old niece, Allie Cibulas, from inoperable brain cancer.

"She had a horrible course," Dr. Barron recalled. "I remember visiting her, being so frustrated. I had so much pent-up energy and I wanted to do something to try to make a difference in the lives of other people affected by children with any type of illness."

So in 2003 he registered for an Ironman competition in Madison, Wis., and asked friends, family, and perfect strangers to champion him by donating money to Allie's Angels—a charity serving terminally ill children and research on pediatric brain cancer that was launched in honor of his niece (www.alliesangels.com).

"I thought, 'I'm going to push myself to my limit and do what I can to try to help out,' " he said. "When little children

go through chemotherapy, they're not prepared for it. I had never done a triathlon in my life, so it was symbolic that I was going to go do something I'd never done before and fight my own personal battle to complete it. It pales in comparison to what Allie went through, but the symbolism is that I was going to fight my hardest battle in honor of her, without having prior experience."

After nearly a year of training, when race day arrived he completed the event and helped to raise several thousand dollars for Allie's Angels. "It wasn't a lot of money," he said. "But for me it was more [about] creating awareness and putting my own sweat and tears into it."

Dr. Barron described feeling like an "imposter" in a crowd of highly trained triathletes during the race. "I remember when I crossed the finish line many hours after the winner, still seeing the winner of the race there to cheer me on and welcome me to the club," he said. "It's a feeling of acceptance. It was very emotional, thinking about my niece as I went through the race. That kind of kept me going the whole time."

With his first Ironman behind him, Dr. Barron went on to improve his completion times in subsequent Ironman competitions in Lake Placid, N.Y., and in Louisville, Ky., keying in on specific charities to support for each event. In August, he returned to Louisville to compete in the Ford Ironman Lousiville event and help raise money for the National Alliance on Mental Illness Michigan (www.namimi.org), an organization for which his wife has volunteered.

Dr. Barron's ultimate Ironman goal is to compete in Kona, Hawaii, the premier competition in this event.

In addition to his full-time role as a hospitalist for Michigan Medical, P.C. at Spectrum Butterworth in Grand Rapids, Dr. Barron is an essential caretaker of his wife, Dr. Denise Barron-Kraus, and their two teenage sons.

Dr. Barron-Kraus left medical practice in 2000 because she suffers from mental health issues and fibromyalgia that affects her ability to perform activities of daily living. That leaves Dr. Barron precious little time for training, but he manages.

"My husband's ability to dedicate so much time and energy to exercise, in addition to his demanding work schedule at the hospital and home, is amazing to me," Dr. Barron-Kraus said.

"His choice of hobby is a great one for him as he has a significant family cardiac history. He is in better shape than the 19-year-old I met in college. In addition to the physical benefits of exercise, it serves as his main stress-reliever, improving all areas of his life," she continued.

COURTESY KYLE BARRON-KRAUS

Dr. Barron started training for the Ironman after the death of his niece.

He noted that participating in Ironman competitions have helped him achieve a "can-do mindset" for whatever challenges come his way.

"Being able to do an Ironman shows that I can accomplish just about anything I put my mind to," he said. "I believe it positively affects my work attitude and my attitude at home. The biggest thing for me is, as a physician I always want to make a difference in the lives of people."

By doing Ironman competitions, "I'm able to do that. While I haven't raised a ton of money, I've been able to add meaning to my personal life while raising money and awareness for important causes," Dr. Barron said. ■

By Doug Brunk

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The purpose of "The Rest of Your Life" is to celebrate the interests and passions of physicians outside of medicine. If you have an idea for this column or would like to tell your story, send an e-mail to d.brunk@elsevier.com.