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Parkinson's changes game plan for ex-Trail Blazer Brian Grant

by Andy Dworkin, *The Oregonian*

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Don Ryan After the diagnosis of early onset Parkinson's disease made Brian Grant and his wife, Gina, stop and think, he's taken a positive approach and decided to be upbeat "because that's who I am."

Like a lot of folks who just lost a job, Brian Grant was feeling down.

After 12 seasons in the National Basketball Association, three with the Trail Blazers, the well-liked forward and center retired in 2006. He hoped to relax in Miami with his wife and four kids, resting from a bruising career battling bigger centers. Instead, depression settled on Grant, a gloom enhanced by an unsettling and uncontrollable shaking in his left hand.

Grant moved from Miami to the Portland area, hoping to find a job and raise his spirits. But he was afraid to go on interviews, unable to explain his tremors.

Online resources

- National Institutes of Health Parkinson's information: nih.gov
- National Parkinson Foundation: parkinson.org

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- Michael J. Fox Foundation: michaeljfox.org

- To access Brian Grant's Facebook page and send him a message, or to follow him on Twitter: briangrant.org

"I had a rough time," Grant says. "I kind of sat at home, wasn't exercising and picked up more weight. The more weight I put on, the worse my tremor got."

In January, Oregon Health & Science University neurologist Dr. John Nutt delivered a diagnosis that knocked Grant for a loop: Parkinson's disease, a brain disorder that slowly saps a person's ability to control their movements. While the disease is usually seen around age 60, Grant was just 36 when diagnosed.

After a lifetime bigger than most, better than most, richer than most, Grant found himself on the other end of the bell curve, among the youngest group of people diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

"I've had things broken nine times on my body that could be fixed with surgery," Grant said.

"Now I've got something they can't fix. It makes you think about everything around you, being a better father, being a better husband. Things that seemed so damned important to me don't seem so damned important now."

No one knows just what causes Parkinson's, though the illness may be influenced by both genetic and environmental factors, including certain pesticides. Whatever the reason, brain cells that make the powerful chemical dopamine start to die. As more cells die, people develop a host of movement problems: trembling and poor coordination sometimes, slow movement and stiffness at others.

"We have no proven therapies that will slow the progression of the disease, though that's what everybody wants," Nutt said. "Here's a disease that's going to get worse across time, and I think trying to adapt to that is a real challenge."

While being diagnosed with Parkinson's at 36 is rare, Nutt said he's had patients as young as 19 at diagnosis. The disease is similar regardless of the patient's age, he said. In fact, most people with Parkinson's live into their 70s, whether they were diagnosed late in life or before 50, the cut-off for the "early onset" Parkinson's diagnosis shared by Grant and actor Michael J. Fox (who was 29 when his symptoms appeared).

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Joel Davis As a member of the Portland Trail Blazers from 1997 to 2000, Brian Grant was a fan favorite, going against -- and succeeding against -- much larger opponents.

Younger Parkinson's patients do tend to share a few features, Nutt said. They often get more help from drugs that boost dopamine levels in the brain. But younger patients also are more prone to certain movement problems that are side effects of those same drugs. People who get Parkinson's before 50 also respond better to deep brain stimulation, a treatment where a surgeon places in the brain an electrode whose signals ease the illness.

Grant wants to avoid taking Parkinson's drugs as long as possible. He's thrown himself into a new exercise regimen, which Nutt said is one of the best ways for Parkinson's patients to preserve good coordination and motion. He has also vastly improved his diet, cutting out the fast food meals that tempt many young professional basketball players and eating more vegetables, organic and raw foods.

He also has tried a host of non-traditional treatments for his symptoms. Grant started getting colonics and spends time each week in an oxygen-rich hyperbaric chamber. He also started seeing Vancouver naturopath and medical doctor Daniel Newman who, Grant says, "put me on a strict vitamin and mineral regimen," including intravenous mineral infusions.

"My body is probably becoming healthier now than it had ever been," Grant says.

While he pursued those treatments, Grant kept quiet about his diagnosis for months. He still wasn't sure what to tell others, even his own children, about Parkinson's.

"It wasn't until probably two-and-a-half weeks ago that I started diving into what Parkinson's is," he says. "Now I'm starting to read more about it, the drugs, the side effects of the drugs."

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Grant also decided to tell the world about Parkinson's, following the example of Muhammad Ali's family and Fox, who reached out to support Grant after his diagnosis. Grant has been giving TV and magazine interviews and talking to his kids and other people more about the disease.

In some ways, Grant's focus on health is an old one. For years, Grant pursued quiet charity work, focusing especially on children's health. He started a foundation to help seriously ill children and has helped Oregon kids in many ways, from organizing bone marrow drives to hand-delivering food to families with sick children staying at Ronald McDonald Houses. Only Grant hadn't been the patient, until now.

"The fact that it happened to me, with this platform I've been given, means I'm supposed to get out there," Grant says.

Since his diagnosis, his focus on living healthily, his decision to go public with his news, Grant's depression has lifted and his tremors have somewhat eased up.

"I feel like I'm in an OK place," he says. Knowing why his hand shakes "is like a weight lifted off of me, like I don't have to walk around in fear wondering. ... I just keep an upbeat look on my face, because that's who I am."

