

Two friends run the race of their lives

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Bill Wendell, head of Wendell Marketing, and Ben Caswell attend the Pops by the Sea concert in Hyannis on Sunday.

Merrily Lunsford/Cape Cod Times

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BREWSTER – When he was young, Bill Wendell played basketball and baseball. As he got older, he took up tennis and golf – but whatever he did he was always moving.

Wendell, 60, a civic leader and Hyannis businessman, now sits stiffly in a mechanized wheelchair at his home off Route 6A, the symptoms of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis – ALS or “Lou Gehrig’s Disease” – obvious in his inability to move any part of his body but his head.

On Sunday, Wendell’s business partner, Ben Caswell, will run the Falmouth Road Race in his honor to raise money for West Falmouth–based Compassionate Care ALS, a nonprofit organization that has helped Wendell and others live with the debilitating disease.

While Wendell’s positive attitude remains in the face of his many physical challenges, his tendency to get to the core of an issue was apparent Tuesday.

“It’s awful,” Wendell said matter-of-factly, the so-called “ALS accent” occasionally making it difficult to understand him without leaning closer. “I’ve always been very active. I guess being less active is somewhat secondary to knowing that I’m going to die.”

Still as keenly aware as he was before the disease struck – ALS destroys the muscles but not the mind – Wendell quickly clarified his point. “We’re all going to die, but I have a more precise sense of when than most.”

Even facing the inevitability of his condition, Wendell is working hard to ensure his business – Wendell Marketing in Hyannis – and his well-known generosity, do not fade with his physical abilities.

He continues to work from his home, advising his son Patrick and Caswell on the business. He also continues to work on the boards of several Cape Cod nonprofit groups.

Patrick, who with his mother, Ellen, has been advocate and caregiver for his father, said he has learned more about his father in the process. “Over this time I’ve gotten to know my father a little better,” Patrick said.

‘John Wayne’ Tough

Despite obvious limitations, Wendell remains an integral part of the company’s day-to-day operations, meeting with clients and using voice-recognition software installed on his computer to work from home, Caswell said.

“His mind is 100 percent so I can be here for 15 minutes and bounce things off him,” Caswell said. “It may take him a little longer to say the things he needs to say, or I may need to sit a little closer but it’s the same.”

Families of people with ALS each have their own unique approach to the disease, Compassionate Care ALS founder and executive director Ron Hoffman said. “What works for one family may not work for another,” he said.

In Wendell’s case, Hoffman’s group has provided ramps and other equipment to make it easier for him to get around the house and remain independent.

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What is ALS?

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or “Lou Gehrig’s Disease” is a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects the nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. The degeneration of motor neurons eventually leads to death. When the neurons die, the ability of the brain to control muscles is lost and the muscles atrophy.

The disease can affect anyone. Each year more than 5,600 people in the U.S. are diagnosed with the disease or 15 people each day. At any one time as many as 30,000 Americans have ALS. Most people who develop ALS are between 40 and 70 years old. n Half of all people who have ALS live at least three years or more after being diagnosed. One-fifth of those diagnosed live five years or more and up to 10 percent live more than 10 years.

There is no cure for the disease, although some therapies and care seem to have extended the life expectancy for people with ALS.

Source: The ALS Association

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"Physically, it has potential to take people to those incredibly dark places, but that is not always the case," Hoffman said. "The emotional aspect of what transpires is beyond most people's comprehension."

For those who know Wendell, it is little surprise that he has continued to work while living with ALS.

"It doesn't surprise me that Bill would handle whatever came his way with an enormous amount of courage and an enormous amount of discipline," said Dick Fairbanks, a fellow board member at the Cape and Islands United Way where Wendell continues to run meetings as chairman of the board.

Wendell is "John Wayne," said Richard Brothers, president of the charitable organization. "He's as tough a person as I've ever known," Brothers said.

Wendell has never missed a meeting during his time on the board and still convenes meetings of the executive committee at his home, Brothers said.

"Wherever it's important, that's where Bill Wendell has been," Brothers said.

Running for charity

Beyond being at every board meeting, Wendell was always available to counsel staff and would even attend holiday parties, said Claire Goyer, executive director of the Duffy Health Center where Wendell sat on the board of directors for two years. "You could count on Bill being the one stopping by and saying thank you to the staff," she said.

Besides his work with Duffy and the United Way Wendell is a member of the board of directors for the Arts Foundation of Cape Cod and attended the Pops by the Sea concert a week ago.

So far, Caswell has raised more than \$6,000 for Compassionate Care ALS. The organization is one of 61 that are participating in fundraising through the Falmouth Road Race, the race's co-director Rich Sherman said.

About 900 of the race's 10,500 runners are running for charity, Sherman said.

Last year the race raised \$1.3 million for charity, a record organizers hope to beat this year. Compassionate Care ALS was the second leading fund raiser last year with \$134,000, he said.

To donate and support

Go to <http://falmouth.ccals.org> and click on "I want to donate." To donate in honor of Bill Wendell, search for Ben Caswell.

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