

## Parkinson's patients find a little freedom

By Mike Touzeau,  
Special to the Green  
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You know you don't dare leave your own house again without any help because you're afraid you're going to fall. If you can imagine that feeling, then you'll have a small taste of what some Parkinson's patients face each day.



But Green Valley's Bill Scott, who has been battling the disease for 20 years now, and Gary Morris, diagnosed eight years ago, have found a little freedom and a lot of confidence with some encouragement from Damian Leuck.

Leuck, who owns Green Valley Bike and Hike, guided both men, who have been active all their lives, into recumbent bicycles, which gives them the opportunity to be outside and get much-needed exercise without the risks of falling that come with traditional bike riding.

Leuck was further surprised to find that Scott's tremors were significantly reduced when he was on the bike, and is now offering a \$150 coupon for any recumbent bike he sells to a Parkinson's patient.

"He's notorious for being all over his neighborhood on his bike," quipped Morris about his friend, whose difficulties with Parkinson's had progressed over the past five years to the point that he had to put his two-wheeler away.

"I had more problems with balance about five years ago," recalled Scott, who swam, rode, and danced regularly, but whose symptoms now make it virtually impossible for him to be alone much, so he read an article about the new wave of recumbent riders who find the machines easier as they age, and he bought the first one Leuck had in his shop.

“I first fell in love with the appearance of it,” he admitted, and he was soon putting in 30 miles a week, loving the fact that he could get out of the house and stay active.

“I have to hang onto things around the house to get around,” Scott explained, “but I get on my bike, and I don’t have to do that.”

Raised on a farm in Nebraska, Scott, 67, had always been an outdoor guy who hunted, fished, and rode horses. A retired geologist who worked all over the West, the grandfather of four was on the radio and used to write a weekly column for the Arizona Silverbelt in Globe before retiring here in 92.

Now he uses a walker and cannot keep thoughts connected with words to write or speak efficiently as he did, though he won’t give up.

“The two biggest problems that make Parkinson’s worse are depression and stress,” he said. “You end up with a different set of symptoms than you had the month before,” he explained, describing the frustrations that one suffers as one gets excited about making progress, and another set of obstacles crop up.

Simple movements we all take for granted, like standing, sitting, and walking are a challenge for him. He shakes, has difficulty keeping thoughts, and relies on devoted wife Bonnie for both physical and emotional support. He retains his sense of humor and his drive to fight the disease, evidenced by the joy he says he still gets from being able to climb on the three-wheeler and get out in the fresh air and sunshine.

“You are a bigger person than when you were when you can go outside,” Scott said thoughtfully.

Though he can ride less often now, he plans to ride in the Country Fair White Elephant Parade, wearing his “Power over Parkinson’s shirt, and has signed up for a ballroom dance class with the Tucson APDA.

He and Morris are hopeful that they can ride for Parkinson’s in El Tour de Tucson. The race is Nov. 17, with divisions for cyclists who want to ride distances from one-fourth mile to 109 miles.

Morris, president of the Green Valley/Sahuarita branch of APDA (American Parkinson’s Disease Association), still golfs, bowls, and though he continues to ride his two-wheeler, testified that he bought the recumbent because he found that it’s easier for him to ride longer distances without tiring, and he knows balance problems may be lurking down the road for him, too.

“One of the biggest things for Parkinson’s patients is to be able to take big breaths,” he said, explaining that exercise of the diaphragm, which is weakened with the disease, is critical, and taking the recumbent up hills really helps with that.

Tucson APDA Program Coordinator for Information and Referral at U of A's Department of Neurology, Dr. Cynthia Holmes agrees that, given the latest research information, exercise is extremely important for Parkinson's patients.

"It can improve their quality of life," she stated emphatically.

"By refusing to let this condition limit your activities and by taking steps to promote your overall health and well-being, you can regain some of the control you may feel the diagnosis has taken from you," Holmes wrote in an educational supplement last month.

Becky Farley, assistant professor in research at U of A's Department of Physiology, referred to the latest Parkinson's research that successfully proved in animal testing that daily exercise protects dopamine cells, as depletion of dopamine contributes to the loss of neurons in the brain.

Her staff is trying to get funding to do human studies in the area of neurogenesis, the birth of new neuronal cells, and so she and other scientists believe there are key exercise principles that patients need to follow, in addition to maintaining social contact and challenging the mind as often as possible.

"It's like relearning," Farley said, as she explained that exercise should be something they enjoy, like riding a bike.

"Riding a bike gets you outside and makes you feel good," she said, "so it's one of the aspects of exercise that they like, which supports substantiated research that it promotes elasticity."

Neuronal elasticity enables organisms to adapt to change and influences learning and memory throughout life.

The Green Valley APDA meets 9-10 a.m., Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at the Valley Presbyterian Church. Led by physical trainer Eileen Brandt, members exercise and stretch, throw the ball around, and Morris is organizing a "game day" in October to "get everyone moving," as he put it.

Monthly meetings are the first Friday of each month at East Center, and caregivers' groups, including Perky Parkies (women caring for patients), and a men's forum meet at Friends in Deed the third Wednesday of each month to support each other.

"I want to develop a trust," Morris said of the men's group, "so that men can discuss all the problems they'll face with this monster on their backs."

A German teacher from Wayzata, Minn., who created a unique student exchange program with a German high school before retiring, Morris, 64, was a three-sport letterman in college and was an active hiker and cyclist.

Always seeing him out in front, his wife Carroll, a successful author, knew something wasn't right about six years ago.

"I had to slow down for everybody else," he recalled. "When my wife noticed she had to slow down for me, she knew something was wrong."

The former tennis champ, football player, and captain of Brigham Young University's bowling team now shuffles with a slow gait, but likewise refuses to give in.

Though it's a lot tougher these days, with four 300 games in his history Morris can still manage to roll it down the alley.

"They'll have to pack me out of that place," he said.

When he's not bowling, shooting pool, or leading the fight against Parkinson's, Morris is putting in about 15 miles a day on his sporty three-wheeler.

"I believe it slows the progression of the disease," he stated, and it appears that science agrees.

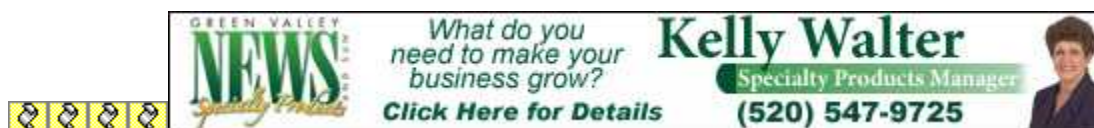
"Use it or lose it," he said, smiling, as friend Bill nodded in agreement.

Determination from two courageous men who now bring a little newfound freedom and confidence along for the ride.

Mike Touzeau is a Green Valley resident and freelance.

*PHOTO SUBMITTED*

George Girod, Gary Morris and Will Torok, from left, get ready to ride in last fall's first Green Valley El Tour to raise money for Parkinson's research.



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