Donavon Henrion

Face Off: Donavon's MS Journey

Hockey is a big deal in Shaunavon, Saskatchewan. The *Globe and Mail* and *CBC* have called it a hockey hotbed. Primarily a farming community with a population of 1800, Shaunavon is located an hour's drive from both the Alberta and Montana borders. You will certainly recognize a few of the professional hockey players from the Shaunavon area: Hayley Wickenheiser for one, Braydon Coburn, Kole Lind, Jayden Schwartz, Bryan Trottier, Zach Smith, Dyson Stevenson, Kale Kessy – the list goes on! Many expected Donavon Henrion to join that list. After all, Donavon was playing in the Senior Hockey League at 15 years old, holding his own against players 25 to 35 years old.

"I had scouts coming down to watch me play, letters coming in with invites to Junior [Hockey League] camps, and phone calls from team's [General Managers]. It was overwhelming. That year, 2010 or so, was when my first symptoms of multiple sclerosis (MS) occurred.

Despite the small population, there are many people living with MS in Shaunavon. Donavon had participated in the MS Walk in Eastend, one of the closest communities, for many years in support of his uncle who also lives with MS. Long before his own diagnosis in 2016, Donavon had experienced MS symptoms, he just didn't know it yet.

"My last year of Junior hockey, I couldn't skate backwards. I started questioning myself, thinking, I know I'm better than this. Do I just suck at hockey now? I was tiring out so quickly and was sore all the time. I was taking a lot of over-the-counter painkillers and at one point, the trainer cut me off… During a trip to Mexico, my feet went numb; I had that pins and needles sensation. I could still run so I didn't think much of it. I just played it off as a hockey injury. I was only 21."

When his vision started to fail, an optometrist told him there was nothing wrong. That was the same reply he kept getting at the walk-in clinics.

"It's so frustrating not knowing what is going on with your body and not getting any answers. I turned to alcohol, as well as painkillers. I fell into a depression. The alcohol numbed the pain and made me forget for a while that there was something seriously wrong. I was drinking five times a week and sometimes a case of beer a night. My coordination started to go as well."

Donavon clearly remembers the night that he realized he couldn't keep ignoring the symptoms. He went to skate at an outdoor rink near his house.

"I laced up my skates and stepped on the ice and – BAM – I fell. I kept trying to get up and kept falling. I just sat on the ice and pulled out my phone and called my mom. I told her, 'We need to go get me checked out. I can't skate anymore.' It was a frightening feeling. I was losing control of my body and I didn't know why."

After many troubling symptoms, Donavon secured an appointment for an MRI. In 2016, he was diagnosed with MS. He and his mom discussed treatment options with the medical team at the Saskatoon MS Clinic. It was overwhelming going from zero answers to information overload. The four-hour drive back to Shaunavon was very quiet.

"All my life I had swagger, right? I had been good at sports and all of it was taken away from me. There was no negotiation, just a snap of your fingers and all of it was gone."

As a permanent figure in the Shaunavon and area sports circles, several slow pitch tournaments and hockey camps around his hometown held fundraisers for Donavon to offset travel expenses to get treatments in Saskatoon at the only MS clinic in the province. A pancake breakfast brought out the whole town. When two close friends got married, they insisted he have the boot of money they had collected at their event. Despite the strong community support, the MS treatment he was initially prescribed was not working.

Back in Saskatoon, his doctor recommended a high-efficacy treatment that suppresses the immune system and is typically prescribed for people who have been unresponsive to other MS disease modifying therapies (DMTs).

CONTINUED ....

Face Off: Donavon's MS Journey

CONTINUED..........

"I didn't have anything to lose, my MS was progressing faster and faster."

Donavon found the treatment experience draining. For five days, he took infusions of steroids and then a DMT. The next year he did the same treatment, thankfully only three days of infusions though. He lost 40 pounds.

"After that, my balance improved and I didn't look drunk when I walked. Between my first and second treatments, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. She went to Saskatoon herself for six weeks to do her treatments, while I was the one who stayed home. It was tough on me 'cause my mom and I are close, it's only her and I."

While he doesn't pretend it has been easy, Donavon's resilience is remarkable. Things have improved since the night he fell at the outdoor rink, through hard work and the community support that continued outside of the arena. Back home in Shaunavon, he helps a farmer during harvest, works out six days a week with a friend who is a personal trainer, and began playing the guitar, which has helped his coordination. He enjoys tinkering with engines from cars to lawnmowers with a family friend. He often score keeps local Minor Hockey games and is always willing assist a hockey or football coach in wrangling players. While he still dreams of skating again, nothing could keep Donavon away from the arena.

"Before the infusions, I was almost at the point of needing a wheelchair. I should've been using a cane, but I never once did. I was too stubborn. The results of my last MRI showed my lesions are smaller and not all of them are active. That's the best news I've had in a few years!"

Since his diagnosis, the Saskatchewan Blue Cross MS Walk has taken on more significance for Donavon.

"Before I was just a supporter. No one knows what it is like to live with MS until you live that reality. The MS Walk reminds me that I'm loved and I'm not in this fight alone. It inspires me to never give up."

Written by Amy Baldwin, Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada, Marketing and Communications Coordinator. This article was originally published on the MS Society Blog. You can find it and many other articles at blog.mssociety.ca.