

Team Hope: Beth Bjerke's Grand Hike for a Grand Cause

Four years after a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease at age 44, Beth Bjerke took on a big challenge in a "grand" way. On April 11th, Bjerke, now 48, crossed the invisible finish line of Bright Angel Trail, a 20-mile hike to the bottom of the Grand Canyon and back again.

The Tucson-resident and mother of two chose to hike the Grand Canyon during Parkinson's Awareness Month to raise awareness of Young-Onset Parkinson's disease (YOPD) and the huge toll it takes on families.



From left to right: Colton (Beth's youngest son), Steve (Beth's husband), Beth Bjerke, Tina (Beth's stepsister), Alison (Colton's girlfriend), and Uncle Frank.

"We're not all alike, but as a family, we live life on a tight rope," Bjerke explained. "My hope is to find ways to bring together kids who have a parent with Parkinson's and help them cope."

To prepare for the backpacking trip, Bjerke focused on setting short-term goals. "The Grand Canyon gave me a reason to get up and get going every day, and not give in to apathy," she said. "I didn't want to become depressed." To regain her strength and balance, Bjerke worked with a personal trainer. "I went into the gym half-crunched over, like an 80-year-old lady, and came out looking normal again," she said.

Bjerke's homegrown hiking team included her husband, her youngest son and his girlfriend, her stepsister and a



close friend. Together, they entered the Grand Canyon in a snow flurry and trekked to the bottom, reaching the Colorado River hours later. They continued their four-day journey on foot through unpredictable weather and amazing views. At one point, a painfully swollen toe threatened to sideline Bjerke, but the avid outdoorswoman decided to "cow girl up" and stuffed her purple toe back into her shoe and pressed forward in pursuit of her goal.

Bjerke's family and friends surpassed her goal of raising \$5,000 for the National Parkinson Foundation. "After being diagnosed with PD, so many people say what now? We all start off that way," she said. "For me, this is what works best; for how long, I don't know, but I just came out of one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World."

Today, Bjerke is taking scuba diving lessons and dreaming of paragliding the Grand Tetons someday. "You can dream," she said. "It may not be the best time or conditions, but you can still reach for small goals and build on them."



For more information about starting your own community fundraiser, visit www.parkinson.org/teamhope.