I was born in the sun.

Growing up in Southern California in the 60s instilled in me a deep appreciation for the outdoors that I never outgrew. If there was a chance to surf, ski, hike, run, swim, or just be outside, I always took it. I swam and played water polo in school, then fell in love with running after college. This led to many marathons and triathlons, and although I wasn't exactly elite, I lived to race.

I am a great believer in pursuing one's passions, so I chose a field that let me do just that. I love animals, and have always been mildly obsessed (there, I said it) with dogs, so I landed a job in a Veterinary clinic and became a vet tech. I settled down in Costa Mesa, right near work, and thoroughly enjoyed my tiny commute and my amazing career.

I bought a second home in Arizona close to the Colorado river, and spent many happy hours water skiing in the summer and riding dirt bikes in the winter. I have always been fascinated with mechanics, and this led me to build hotrods, restore vintage motorcycles, and eventually design and build custom bikes. My garage was always the focal point of my life after work and if I wasn't out running, I was wrenching on one project or another.

In 2010 I joined a group of freelance mascots, aka The Furries. We created our own characters, had costumes custom made, and had a ball doing charity work, fundraisers, and visits to children in the hospital. I led a running group (the Orange County Frontrunners) for years and reveled in another group of close friends. Life was nearly perfect. I had a job that I enjoyed, hobbies that I kept me active, and a wonderful group of friends.

Then, in the spring of 2016, I noticed that my running times were slowing down. At first, I attributed it to getting older, or inadequate hydration, or the wrong shoes, but no matter what I tried I kept losing ground. I had never had a major illness or injury, so a diagnosis like ALS was the last thing on my mind. Eventually, after a ton of medical visits and a million different tests, the doctor looked me in the eye and told me I have ALS. He said I should get my affairs in order, as I only had a short time left.

What does one do after getting that news? Put yourself in my place, a 54-year-old man sitting on the exam table in your boxer shorts, being told that you're going to die soon, without a doubt, end of story. I thanked the doc, made a follow up appointment, numbly walked out to my car, closed the door and had a good cry. I sincerely wondered if this was really happening. It was surreal.

I'm not the brightest bulb, but I am a good problem solver, so my brain finally kicked into gear and I began the long process of dealing with a new reality. I knew I needed to enlist the help and support of my friends, so after the tears abated, I began to call and text those closest to me. Then I went across the street to a Mexican restaurant and had a giant margarita and a terrific lunch. It was time to start finding ways to put a good spin on my diagnosis. The only thing we can truly control in this life is our own attitude, and I was determined to stay positive.

Fast forward to the present. I can no longer run, or even walk unassisted for more than a few steps. I retired from my dream job, although I am still working a few days a week to help with data entry and the like. My boss and my coworkers have been instrumental in helping me cope with the disease.

I can't ride motorcycles, because I can't shift or use the clutch. I can't take my beloved dogs to the park, surf, hike, ski or do a thousand things that gave my life meaning. My speech and swallowing are getting worse. My left hand is fairly non-functional. I can't sit up in bed without major effort. Every single aspect of my life has changed in the past year.

ALS is a brutal disease. It needs to be solved. The only thing that has kept me sane and moving forward is the love and support from my cherished friends. Without them I'd be lost.

My dad always said to focus on the positive in life and concentrate on what you CAN do as opposed to what you can't. That's why I'm honored to take part in this year's LA marathon. To be candid, I was against the idea at first. I didn't want to be the guy in the wheelchair getting pushed down the course, waving a limp claw-hand at the crowd while trying to smile, all the while dying inside because I wanted badly to be the one running.

But then I realized that this was something I COULD do, and that my presence would make a difference, help raise money to fight ALS, and hopefully inspire a few folks to never give up. It would put another positive spin on the disease, and that made me feel very lucky indeed.

I’ve noticed a theme in reading the stories of people with ALS. We often call ourselves lucky, and I believe this is due to the love that we freely receive from friends, family and even strangers. Knowing people care about you deeply is the greatest feeling in the world. We are lucky indeed.

I truly hope that you'll take a minute to consider my story, to help support ALS research, and to never give up in your own life. If my presence here pushes us one step closer to a cure, then it's worth every mile in that chair.

Thank you so much for your support!

~ Tony Barrett