

Allison's long road back

By Jon Gallo
Examiner Staff Writer

Susan Allison is still looking for answers. It's been a little more than five years since the 54-year-old resident of Phoenix in Baltimore County, suffered what doctors said was a spinal stroke that almost left her confined to a wheelchair.

She still doesn't know what makes her right leg stop working properly, as it suddenly buckles and causes her to fall. She said she's been told by doctors from the city's best hospitals her problems stem from either Lou Gehrig's Disease, multiple sclerosis or a brain tumor — only to have further tests rule out each potentially fatal ailment.

Allison said she may never know what caused the devoted wife and mother of two to spend several years prohibited from exercising on doctors' orders. She wants to know how a woman who has never smoked a cigarette and rarely consumed alcohol can go in a matter of months from training for a marathon to struggling to walk.

"I'm 54 years old. I shouldn't have to use a cane to get around," she said. "I'm too young to be going through this. I just want to know what's happening to me, and nobody knows. I'm on my eighth neurologist.

Before this happened I would go for walks, I'd work out at the gym, and I'd do aerobics. And when I was 49 my goal was to complete a marathon before my 50th birthday."

Now, Allison is attempting something even more impressive. She's going to try to complete the 5K race at Saturday's Baltimore Running Festival.

And she's going to do it without using a cane.

And she's going to do it knowing she'll only cover a few inches with each step.

And she's going to do it knowing the slightest misstep or accidental bump by a fellow runner could very easily send her crashing to the pavement.

"It's going to be very scary," she said. "I can't remember the last time I didn't use my cane. I need to be aware of everything. I need to know where the empty water cups are; I need to know where all the banana peels and Power Bar wrappers are. I need to know every inch of the terrain. When you're not real stable and don't have very good balance, the slightest touch can cause me to fall and hurt myself. That's what I'm really worried about."

Said Michael Allison, Susan's husband of 31 years: "She's goal-oriented, and she's going to deliver. She's had to overcome so much the past few years, so this is not going to hold

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her back. She's going to cross the finish line, and I'm going to be there waiting for her.”

Allison's path to Saturday's starting line began a little more than a year ago when she hired Dominic Sessa as her personal trainer after her body had shriveled to where she could not bend her knees and could hardly walk. It took her considerable effort just to stretch her legs, which were pasty white and frail.

But Susan grew stronger, and in August, Sessa sent her an e-mail telling her “there was no time like the present” to attempt to finish a 5K race.

“She's been such a warrior in how hard she's worked and how much improvement she's already shown,” Sessa said. “She's ready for this. Being able to do this 5K will change her whole life. You need to know that by seeing how far she's come has really been inspiring. She's inspired me.”



Above, Susan Allison uses a sling to train at MAC Wellness Center in preparation for Saturday's Baltimore Running Festival. At right, Personal trainer Dominic Sessa helps Allison stretch her sciatic nerve.

— Arianne Starnes/Examiner

But Susan, who will hold her trainer's arm every step of the way on Saturday, inspires more than Sessa.

“It breaks my heart to see her in this condition,” said Eric Allison, her 26-year-old son. “But I see what a tough person she is, and it motivated me and my sister [Kristen, 23] to push ourselves. Kristen is running the 5K. I've never run more than 12 miles before, but I'm going to run my first marathon on Saturday, and I guarantee you that I wouldn't be running this race without my mom.”

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