

'Fighting Machinist' Sam Beekman is in the battle of his life against ALS

By Michael Gutwig
Editor & Manager

Sam Beekman has run in five marathons, competed in the Hood to Coast Relay numerous times, carded a hole-in-one, bagged elk, and caught hundreds of fish.

Today, the 31-year member of the 'Fighting Machinists' Willamette Lodge 63 needs a walker to get around his Fairview home, and a wheelchair whenever he ventures outside. He cannot hold onto a pen to write.

Beekman, 63, has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, more commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease, or ALS.

There is no known cause of the disease, which slowly robs the body of its ability to walk, speak, swallow and breathe, yet the mind remains fully functional. It's not contagious, and can strike anyone at any time. It occurs throughout the world with no racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic boundaries.

ALS is usually fatal within two to five years of diagnosis. There is no known cure.

"This certainly wasn't in the plan," said Beekman.

Beekman put in 31 years machining airplane parts for Boeing Company in Gresham. He retired in August 2008 at age 58. He says he would have worked longer, but lung cancer cut his career short. After doctors removed a portion of his upper lung, Beekman returned to work. But he quickly realized that he had lost his edge, so he



These are some of the medals Sam Beekman received running marathons and working at Boeing.



took advantage of his good union pension and retired.

Throughout his career, Beekman was active in the union. He also was active outside of work. He took up jogging in 1971, the day he quit smoking. That morphed into marathons and long distance relays. He put together a union team — The Running Machinists — for the popular Hood to Coast Relay, a grueling 193-mile trek from Timberline Lodge on Mt. Hood to Seaside on the Oregon Coast. The Labor Press featured The Running Machinists in a story in 1996.

He and wife Pam have been married for 31 years. They have two adult children and five grandchildren.

Beekman's first symptoms of ALS surfaced in October 2009 while on an elk hunting trip in Colorado. He stumbled several times on the walking trail, then had difficulty mounting a horse.

"I thought it was odd," he recalls.

Later, his son noticed irregularities in his father's speech and coordination. A trip to the doctor was followed by months of tests.

"They knew there was a neurological issue going on," Beekman said. "But my symptoms filled a lot of possibilities."

Eventually, the diagnosis was confirmed as ALS.

Beekman is now among an estimated 450 to 500 ALS patients in Oregon — 30,000 nationwide, said Lance Christian, executive director of the ALS Association's Oregon and Southwest Washington Chapter. The ALS Association assists those with the disorder (see box below), as Medical treatment and care can be staggering — easily exceeding \$60,000 a year.

"It's not a cheap disease to have," Beekman said.

True to his union spirit, Beekman continues to fight for a cause.

He's helping to raise money for the Oregon and SW Washington chapter of the ALS Association — and to draw public



Sam Beekman at home with his dog Lucy.

awareness to the disease.

Beekman will participate in a three-mile SW Washington Walk to Defeat ALS scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 3, at Esther Short Park in Vancouver, Wash.

[A Portland Walk to Defeat ALS is slated for Sunday, Sept. 27, starting at the World Trade Center downtown.]

He's also putting together an ALS team for the Hood to Coast Relay in September. The "Running Machines" will traverse the route on scooters, wheelchairs, and bikes.

"You just can't sit around and say 'woe is me,'" he said.

Beekman is seeking sponsor-

ships from union locals, union members, vendors, and others. He's off to a good start, with a \$1,063 commitment from Machinists Lodge 63.

He hopes, too, that more people will participate in one of the walks.

Beekman acknowledges that ALS has taken a lot from him in a short period. But at the same time, he says he feels "fortunate" and "grateful" for the things he can still do. For instance, last summer he went to Dodger Stadium to watch a Major League Baseball game. That was followed by stops at Disneyland, SeaWorld, and Universal Studios. This year, Hawaii is on the agenda.

Pointing to one of his favorite movies of all time — The Pride of the Yankees — the story of Lou Gehrig, Beekman says Gehrig's farewell speech at Yankee Stadium has stuck with him over the years.

"I have really embraced his remarks," he said.

Gehrig's quote:

"Today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the Earth. I might have been given a bad break, but I've got an awful lot to live for."

To make a donation on behalf of Sam Beekman's Walk to Defeat ALS, go to:
webor.alsa.org/goto/Sam_Beekman

Where does all the money raised go?

The ALS Association chapter serves the entire state of Oregon and the six counties in Southwest Washington. Here is a sampling of local services provided free of charge to people and families living with ALS

- One-on-one consultations with on-staff care services coordinators to assess the needs of those living with ALS, suggest equipment and help families plan for the future.

- A Medical Equipment Loan Program that provides mobility equipment when insurance and other programs cannot fund needed items.

- A comprehensive Alternative Communication and Assistive Technology Program.

- Caregiver support groups, Care Connections guidance, in-home caregiving support and respite care grants to relieve stress and "caregiver burnout."

- Monthly support groups for people with ALS, family members, and friends.

- Support and resources for children who have ALS in their families.

- Bereavement support for family members and friends who have lost someone to ALS.

- Partnerships in ALS multidisciplinary clinics staffed by professionals with ALS expertise.

- Outreach to the local medical community with updates on current ALS needs and solutions.

- Support for local and national public policy efforts, as well as internationally-driven research focused on finding a treatment and ultimately, a cure for ALS.