

People with Parkinson's disease can still do a lot

By Bill Rea

April was Parkinson's Education Month, and members of the Bolton Parkinson's Support Group closed out the month with some inspiration from a former weightlifting champion.

Nelson Sleno of Orangeville was telling the group about his experiences living with Parkinson's disease. He's outlined them in two books he's written.

Sleno, 62, was born in Montreal, and moved to Ontario in 1989.

He was a teacher for 31 years, having taught high school physical education, as well as academic subjects. He also taught behaviour management classes and eventually dealt with developmentally challenged students. He drew a lot of satisfaction from that, marvelling at the innate courage and strength about them.

Sleno was also, for 22 years, a competitive weightlifter at the Olympic level, as well as power lifting. He said he also dabbled for a time in body building. As well, he took up karate when he was 40, earning his second-degree black belt at 45. Then he took up judo. He also found time for mountain biking.

"I loved riding Albion Hills," he said.

"I'm an extreme type personality," he explained. "When I do something, I go full-tilt at it."

Sleno added that has governed his approach when dealing with the Parkinson's.

He said he was like that in his teens. "I made a choice to turn my life around," he explained.

He started going to a gym, and caught the eye of one of the coaches, who wanted him to be flyweight on the Olympic weight lifting team.

Sleno explained he saw adversity in the weights, and knew he had beaten it when he successfully lifted it over his head. That helped him find what he had been looking for in his misspent youth.

"The feeling that I got holding that weight over my head's a little hard to describe," he said. "It was euphoric."

Sleno was at the Olympic trials for the 1976 Games, but broke his ankles with his last lift there. So he concentrated more on power lifting.

He observed that devoting himself to training gave him the discipline he needed to deal with 31 years of teaching.

Sleno said he was involved in an accident with a horse when he was seven, and spent two days in a coma.

"I should have died," he said, adding the experience gave him the unconscious feeling that he was indestructible, so he took a lot of risks when he was a kid.

Sleno said he's read about possible causes of Parkinson's, and has learned people are more susceptible to triggers if they had experienced some sort of brain trauma. There are numerous examples, including Muhammad Ali. "It could be something that allows the trigger to activate more readily," he explained.

The first symptom of the disease Sleno experienced was a twitching in his thumb. Other symptoms included trouble sleeping, waking up frequently in the middle of the night with his left hand shaking.

He tried medication to deal with it.

Sleno recalled the help he received from his doctor at the time.

"He's terrific because he listened to me and he acknowledged I was going to be in control of my treatment program," he remarked.

There were some bad times, apart from the diagnosis. One of them occurred in the fifth year of treatment. He was sitting reading when his left hand started trembling so much that the paper was moving. "I had gone bi-lateral," he said.

The doctor told him that was normal.

There was also a time when he became withdrawn and depressed, but he was able to address that.

"I said, 'Get off your ass and do something useful,'" he recalled.

He went to Headwaters Health Care Centre and started volunteering, and that set off a chain of events that made him active as a speaker and writer.

Sleno has spoken to many groups. At one point, he met an 80-year-old man named Hal, and found they both had a passion for playing blues harmonicas. Sleno had played since he was 17, and Hal took him to an open-mic session, where they played for four hours.

"That harmonica became my 'clean and jerk,'" he declared, realizing it could be a weapon against his Parkinson's. "I had the same feeling I had when I held that weight over my head."

Sleno also said he will be taking part in the Orangeville Jazz festival the first weekend of June, with a partner in an act they call The

Long and The Short of It.

He stressed that people with problems have to do is find something they really love doing. They have to find something, make a plan and decide if they need help to do it, and then go for it. If one is not successful, they should take a step back and see what can be done to make it successful.

He likened Parkinson's to the bully he grew up with.

"Parkinson's wants you to be inactive," he said. "It wants you to be in a wheelchair. It wants you to feel crappy about yourself all the time."

Sleno has written two books. The first was entitled *Shaking Hands*, and it dealt with his constant battle against this enemy. The second book, called *Beyond Shaking Hands*, is more positive, reflecting on what he has accomplished in the last three years.

He stressed the more things one does, despite Parkinson's, the stronger they get.

"If you can be a door, instead of a door mat, you can hold Parkinson's disease at bay," he declared. "Be a door and not a door mat, and live your lives to the fullest and kick back when the Parkinson's is kicking you."



Karen Dowell, community development coordinator with Parkinson's Canada joined Nelson Sleno in cutting this ceremonial cake.



Nelson Sleno demonstrated his skill with a harmonica when he addressed the Bolton Parkinson's Support Group late last month. Photos by Bill Rea