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Man with MS bikes to fight disease, raise money for others affected

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When you're a young man in your 30s, with a wife and two children, the last thing you want to learn is that you have a neurological disease.

But when Tareeq Rupani, 37, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis 16 months ago, he confronted the disease as a challenge to be met and, hopefully, overcome. He began researching MS, not only to help himself, but also to help improve the lives of others affected by the disease.

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Tareeq Rupani plans to ride his recumbent bicycle in the Maroone MS 150 Bike Tour this weekend, round trip from Miami to Key Largo. A native of Kenya in eastern Africa, Rupani and his wife have a 9-year-old daughter and 5-year-old son. He also has three stepdaughters, ages 15, 20 and 22.

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This weekend, the western Lake Worth resident will be one of 2,000 people riding in the Maroone MS 150 Bike Tour. Now in its 20th year, the annual fund-raising bike tour is a 150-mile round trip between Miami and Key Largo. Last year, the bike tour raised \$1.5 million for the fight against MS.

The cyclists will leave Miami on Saturday, spend the night at a camp site in Key Largo and return on Sunday.

The cyclists will include "avid triathletes" and some people, like Rupani, who are battling MS, he said. People with MS will also be volunteering at the event, working at rest stops along the way and helping set up the camp site at John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park.

"Heat is not good for people with MS," Rupani said. "It keeps a lot of people from riding in the bike tour."

This is the second MS fund-raising event Rupani has taken part in this year.

In March, he served as committee chairman for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society - South Florida Chapter's West Palm Beach MS Walk. His team of 32 walkers raised \$15,400. Total money raised from all teams in the West Palm Beach walk won't be tallied until this week.

Rupani said that MS is difficult to diagnose, because there is no single test that determines if a person has the disease.

In Rupani's case, his first symptom was severe headaches. "They were terrible, very painful," he said. "It got to the point where I couldn't function."

His first neurologist misdiagnosed the problem as migraines. But the migraine medicine didn't work, and Rupani began having tingling in his hands, trembling in his legs and ongoing, overwhelming fatigue.

He went to a rheumatologist and a new neurologist and underwent several months of tests, including MRIs and spinal taps. The new neurologist diagnosed MS, but recommended that Rupani get a second opinion from either the University of Miami or the Cleveland Clinic Florida. Rupani went to both places, and the diagnosis was confirmed.

There are treatments that slow down the progression of MS, but no cure. To deal with his disease, Rupani takes 11 pills and an injection every day.

"I take pills to go to work; I take pills to go to sleep," said Rupani, who works in information technology at Tyco International. His eyes are extremely sensitive to light, so he wears sunglasses about 80 percent of the time, both indoors and outdoors.

"The toughest part is the fatigue," Rupani said. "Even after 8 to 10 hours of sleep, you feel like you've run in a 100-mile marathon."

On a trip to Disney World with his children, Rupani suddenly stopped being able to support himself on his left leg. "I had to stop and wait until I could get control of my leg," he said. That's when he knew that he would have to buy a personal electric scooter.

"I'm only 37," Rupani said. "Never in my life did I ever think I'd need an electric scooter, especially not at this age."

Buying the electric scooter was "a big step," he said. "I didn't want my kids to see me on a scooter."

But Rupani has discovered that he can get along without it "about 99 percent of the time."

What is the best advice you have ever received?

"The advice I got from my wife, who said, 'We're in this together, and we'll get through it together. The best thing for anyone is to move forward.'"

That advice has a special meaning for him, Rupani said. "Move forward: Those two words mean so much to anyone with MS."

How would you like to be remembered?

"As a great dad, a good husband and a fighter. I'm going to fight this thing."

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