



Robert Ngo

PULMONARY HYPERTENSION

“Thanks to the PH community, I’ve survived a 1.2-mile gauntlet swim, a 56-mile bike ride in 90 degree heat, a 13.1-mile trail jog, and all 70.3 miles in the Orlando, Florida, IronMan contest.”

August 25, 2006, is my new birthday. That afternoon during my fourth and last year of pharmacy school at Western University of Health Sciences, I was in my cardiology rotation learning about ECG and ECHO at Centinela Hospital in Inglewood, Calif. After I volunteered to get read, the cardiologist said, “You have pulmonary hypertension.”

I chuckled and said, “Viagra, three times a day!”

However, no one was laughing. I have idiopathic pulmonary arterial hypertension.

In retrospect, PH has been a gift in disguise. It directed me to a lifestyle with very different accomplishments. I grew up in the hood. I could have been a gangbanger running with the Blood or Crips, but I couldn’t run. I could’ve mastered five-finger shopping, but I couldn’t run. I could have gratified the whole city, but guess what? I couldn’t run.

Throughout my whole life, I couldn’t run. I couldn’t join the basketball, soccer, football, or cross-country teams at my high school. I was always beating the books. Sometimes, I literally beat my books when I saw others playing in the sun. Not having much luck on land, I tried my luck in the water. I tried out for the high school water polo team. Everyone on the team told me that my lips were blue—I almost drowned in the deep end because I didn’t know how to swim. I wore floaties everyday during practice until I learned how to swim. My perseverance and dedication earned me a spot on the team as the junior varsity goalie. During the two water polo seasons, my teammates occasionally ask me why my lips were blue, but it wasn’t because of my lack of swimming skills.

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- Pulmonary hypertension is high blood pressure in the arteries of the lungs that can lead to heart failure.
- PH patients experience symptoms such as shortness of breath, dizziness, and fatigue. The severity of symptoms usually correlates with the progression of the disease.
- The average time between symptom onset and diagnosis is 2.8 years. This time has barely changed in the past 20 years.
- Most patients are not diagnosed until they are in the late stages of the disease and are experiencing significant limitations of ordinary physical activity.

Source: Pulmonary Hypertension Association—www.phassociation.org

In college, I signed up to represent my school as an Army cadet, and during the summer of my junior year, I was shipped to Fort Knox, Ky. When the bus stopped at the barracks, two drill sergeants rushed toward us screaming bloody murder. I didn't have to deal with their anger management issues the first week because I passed out. But soon after, the military physicians cleared me for training.

During two months of basic training, I rappelled out of a Black Hawk helicopter and mastered my M16 rifle. I sounded off my name, rank, and platoon while my eyes, lungs, and skin burned. With 50 pounds of gear weighing down on me, I navigated through a forest with basketball-size spiders hanging from the trees. While others dropped, I graduated and was offered \$17,000 school scholarship. I just had to pass the run test. I trained and trained, but I couldn't run.

September 11, 2001, to August 25, 2006, was a period of failing health, several appointments with doctors, and misdiagnoses. I was prescribed an Albuterol inhaler and an exercise regimen, which worsened the PH to the point where I couldn't even button my shirt without becoming short of breath.

I was fortunate to be diagnosed during my rotation. I've been prescribed 100 mg of Viagra three times a day, and I feel like three times the man I used to be.

After my birthday, I've tried everything—from skydiving to scuba diving. Thanks to the PH community, I've survived a 1.2-mile gauntlet swim, a 56-mile bike ride in 90 degree heat, a 13.1-mile trail jog, and all 70.3 miles in the Orlando, Fla., IronMan contest.

Robert Ngo was a patient speaker at the ATS 2012 International Conference in San Francisco, Calif.