

# Team Captain **Erin O'Sullivan**

*And Her Inspirational Story of Surviving a Near-Death Experience*

**Read why Erin is involved in the Tour de Cure and committed to finding a cure for diabetes.**

Our thanks to **Erin O'Sullivan**, captain of the new team *Super-Diabetic-Illness-Ketoacidosis*, who shared her personal story of living with diabetes at the Tour de Cure kickoff in January. This is Erin's sixth Tour; she previously rode as a member of the corporate team that her father organized before he changed companies. This is the first year that Erin has been a team captain.

Diagnosed with type 1 diabetes at the age of 18, Erin and her parents **Dave** and **Rose** adapted well and learned the coping and management skills needed to manage the disease. Things were going well as Erin moved away from home and was living in the small central Oregon town of La Pine. And then one day everything changed when she caught a stomach virus that laid her low.

Nearly all of us have experienced a stomach virus that made us violently ill for a time. We were miserable and it took a period of time to recover and feel normal again. That's not the automatic course of things, though, for people with diabetes. A cold, the flu or a stomach virus (among any number of illnesses), can play havoc with maintaining normal blood sugar numbers. As the illness progresses, one becomes dehydrated and insulin resistant. Blood glucose levels can elevate dramatically, inducing a dangerous condition known as diabetic *ketoacidosis* where the body begins to burn fat for energy because the cells are not getting the glucose they need for energy. Ketones build up in the blood, making it more acidic. High levels of ketones can poison the body and induce a condition that can lead to diabetic coma or even death.

Erin had been home from work sick, and her fiancé was working the night shift at the time. When he got home the next morning, he discovered that Erin was unresponsive. After he rushed her to a nearby medical clinic, she was airlifted to the nearest emergency room where doctors worked tirelessly to help save Erin's life. With a blood sugar level over 1500 her situation was very precarious.

It was at this point that her family in Concord, California received the dreaded call to tell them that the medical team caring for her did not expect their daughter to survive, and they immediately



rushed to Oregon with their daughter's life hanging in the balance. The medical team treating her managed to restore her blood glucose to normal levels, and her family arrived to provide support and encouragement. However, she had entered into multi-organ system failure. Her kidneys were shutting down and her blood pressure was dangerously low.



When her heart started to fail, the medical team decided that she needed to be transferred to Portland where she could receive more advanced care. After arriving at the Oregon Health & Science University's ICU, the cardiac specialists there managed to bring her heart back to full function. However, when she still did not

wake up they performed further tests, and determined that she had had suffered a stroke during her ordeal.

Thankfully, she awoke a day later, and the arduous process to a full recovery began. After the stroke she could not stand or walk without assistance, her speech was very slow and slurred, and she had difficulty with hand-eye coordination. After her organ systems recovered she was transferred to a rehabilitation center, and worked with therapists to re-learn how to function. Her youth, her underlying good health and, perhaps most importantly, the assistance and encouragement of her family helped ensure a full recovery in good time.

Today Erin is thriving. In January she began a new job in South San Francisco. She is both working and taking college courses to prepare for new career possibilities. Grateful for the progress that the American Diabetes Association (ADA) has made in treatment advances for people with diabetes, Erin makes the case for support to participate in the Tour de Cure. She also applauds the ADA for its advocacy work to defend and expand the rights of people with diabetes so they can have the same job opportunities as people free of the disease. She notes that she is just one of 29 million Americans with diabetes for whom the ADA has made a difference through its support of research, education and advocacy initiatives. Erin's story and astounding comeback from the brink of death inspire us to redouble our efforts on behalf of people with diabetes so they can live life free of the burdens of this serious disease.