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NEIGHBORS— *Craig & Liz Larcom*

# PARKINSON'S DISEASE PROMPTS



# BRANDI ROMAN TO AIM HIGH

What does Parkinson's disease have to do with Granite Peak? Everything, for Brandi Roman of Great Falls.

Three years ago Roman was positive that she didn't have Parkinson's. It was funny though. As she worked through her printout from the Mayo Clinic's website, she highlighted only one factor for a disease called essential tremor—her age. "Huh. There's a lot of highlighting on that Parkinson's side," she thought.

As a nurse, and one whose great grandmother has Parkinson's at that, Roman knew that Parkinson's comes in two flavors, the less common one known as young onset Parkinson's disease, which usually strikes between the ages of 30 and 50, and the regular kind. Actor Michael J. Fox was diagnosed at age 30, an exceptionally early age. So 25-year-old Roman had no doubt that whatever was causing her shakes couldn't be Parkinson's. She thought it was just stress, but her doctor noticed her twitching leg and referred her to a neurologist.

When Roman finally stopped cancelling her appointments and saw the neurologist, she met two of four tests for Parkinson's. Much later, when she tried the sample medicine, it quelled the trembling that she had feared would keep her from working at her job as a critical care nurse that day. She pushed aside the fact that if Sinemet works, it confirms a diagnosis of Parkinson's. And she ignored her deteriorating penmanship and sometimes shuffling gait. At a follow-up appointment, the neurologist declared Parkinson's, but all Roman could think was, "You're crazy, lady."

Two years later, Roman traveled to the Mayo Clinic, at the insistence of her puzzled mother. Here she tested positive for the Parkinson's mutation. "I'm 100 percent confident in diagnosing you with Parkinson's disease," her doctor added.

Roman was stunned, but she could deny it no longer. "I was kind of down in the dumps and I was bummed out about a lot and I felt like there was a big mountain sitting on top of me or in my path. And it felt like, how are you supposed to get around this? It felt like it was changing everything in my life. And Amy (Wood) and Pete (Ramos), I was over at my friend Amy's house one day and they were like, 'Why don't you just climb a mountain?' And I was like, 'What do you mean just climb a mountain? And Pete was like, 'You don't have to go around it. Just go straight up it.,' Roman remembers.

"And so it made sense, and it's kind of like proving a point, but just because you have a degenerative disease or any

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kind of disease for that matter, doesn't mean you have to stop doing what you always loved or stop dreaming. You can actually do more if you want. So now my whole campaign is to go above and beyond what expectations are," she says.

Which is how Roman came to set her sights on Granite Peak, Montana's highest point. Roman has never climbed a mountain in her life, unlike Wood and Ramos. Once the snow clears, Roman will be taking climbing classes and trying

**LEFT: Brandi Roman imagines what it will feel like to stand atop Granite Peak. She is taking up mountain climbing to conquer the mountain in her life, although she's been diagnosed with young onset Parkinson's disease.**



Brandi Roman, right, starts to learn the ropes with her friend Amy Wood, left. Roman may have young onset Parkinson's disease, but she is preparing to climb Granite Peak, at 12,807 feet above sea level, the highest point in Montana. Roman's Summit 4 Parkinson's non-profit, aims to give those with the disease hope and encouragement about keeping active.

some easier peaks before taking on 12,807-foot Granite Peak in August. She expects weather and loose shale, a challenge to her balance, to be her biggest obstacles. The party of four will include her boyfriend, Ryan Glibbery, also new to climbing. Roman plans to wear a helmet signed by some of the decades-old members of her Parkinson's support group.

The drive to get fit enough for such a climb began late last summer. Roman hiked, she kayaked, she worked out at the gym. This winter she and Wood took up downhill skiing with a vengeance.

Exercise is beneficial for those with Parkinson's, and Roman reports, "I've done like a 180 since I was diagnosed. My balance is better, the walking is better. You know, I'm a lot more active. I'm constantly outdoors."

Climbing Granite is not just a one-shot deal. Roman is tying in the climb with a non-profit group which she's creating, "Summit 4 Parkinson's."

"Part of the goal of this whole organization is to raise money, but not only to raise money, but raise awareness through physical activity. So we're going to do stuff like climb mountains,

do bike rides, do a marathon." says Roman. "It's to inspire other people to get in and do it, too."

Roman and her supporters are not wasting any time. The non-profit kicks off with a fundraiser at Montana ExpoPark April 23. (See [www.summit4parkinsons.com](http://www.summit4parkinsons.com).) 

**Recommended websites:**

[www.youngparkinsons.org](http://www.youngparkinsons.org)

[www.apdaparkinson.org](http://www.apdaparkinson.org)

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/parkinsons-disease/DS00295>



~Writers and photographers Craig & Liz Larcom cover travel and the outdoors for national, regional and state magazines. They live in Great Falls, MT.