

# No stopping for Parkinson's disease

**I**n typical letter carrier fashion, adversity only made **Mark Burek** work harder.

In 2007, with seven years of carrying the mail and an additional 21 years in the Navy behind him, the Albany, NY



Branch 29 member was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. He was 49.

Instead of giving up, Burek made the best of the situation. He continued to work for another decade, formed a local benefit group for others with Parkinson's—and even ran a marathon.

Parkinson's disease is a progressive disease—one that gets worse over time—involving the malfunction and death of brain cells. The cause is unknown, but the symptoms may be delayed with medication and lifestyle choices. Parkinson's also causes loss of motor control, leading to symptoms such as tremors, stiffness and loss of balance and coordination. It affects an estimated 1.5 million people in the United States, and is perhaps best known as the disease that afflicts actor Michael J. Fox and that also afflicted the late boxer Muhammad Ali.

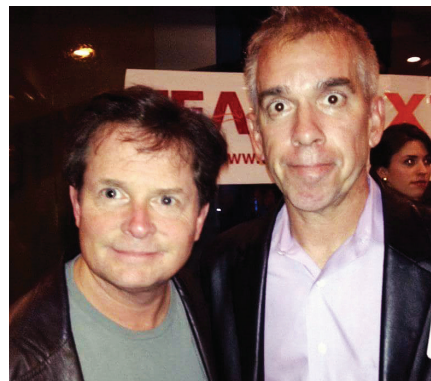
When doctors delivered this diagnosis in 2007, Burek had no idea he would come so far. His first thought was that his career was over.

"I didn't know too much about the disease and that's the first thing that popped into my mind," he said. "It was totally a blast in the face."

He soon learned that he still had time to work and enjoy life, and he could take control. "I started doing my own research, and I found out how to prolong and maintain my quality of life, and how to fight the disease," he said. "It progresses over a period of time, and it depends on the person. If you watch what you eat and exercise, you can slow the disease down."

Burek managed to do so while not allowing it to slow him down. He continued to carry the mail for almost another decade. Occasionally, he had to ask for help, but he had the full support of his supervisors and colleagues.

In 2011, he formed a support group called Hope Soars for others in the



**Above: Mark Burek (r) with Michael J. Fox  
Left: Even with Parkinson's Disease, Burek ran the New York City Marathon.**

Albany area with Parkinson's. Hope Soars helps to keep people with Parkinson's active and close to each other through programs such as a stationary cycling class called "Pedaling for Parkinson's," yoga, boxing and other social and fundraising events.

Two years later, Burek fulfilled a lifelong goal by running in the New York City Marathon. "Running the marathon has been something I've always wanted to do, but every time I tried to do it, something came up," he said. He joined other runners with Parkinson's as part of the Michael J. Fox Foundation's team.

"It's actually pretty amazing that Parkinson's could give me my shot at running the marathon," Burek said. "My time was four hours, 11 minutes, which isn't too shabby."

Burek finally retired from carrying mail last year when the New York winter caught up with him. "With Parkinson's, adverse weather will retard your motor skills," he said.

Burek is living proof that people who receive a diagnosis of Parkinson's can thrive for many years. "The diagnosis was pretty devastating at first," he said, "but we got things under control." **PR**