

It seems like only last season that I was paddling with Gord Cole in Parry Sound on the Seguin River, doing buoy turn after buoy turn. A lot has happened since those days of being the newbie to marathon canoeing. It's weird now when people ask how long I've been at it and I have to think about it and say "geez, about 11 years now I guess."

I started paddling my last couple years of high school, did alright for a rookie. I paddled all through 4 years of my Kinesiology degree at Waterloo, started to do fairly well at Provincials, Canadian Nationals and USCA Nationals. I tried to keep paddling a little during Teachers College up in North Bay even though I wasn't quite feeling myself. I did alright in races, nothing to write home about.

I found a place to paddle when I moved down to Toronto. I tried to paddle as much as I could but found that after work I was just way too tired to do anything but sleep. I'd have a nap after work, set my alarm to get up for 6:30 practice but found myself just wiped, I'd sleep through the whole night. I attributed it to the stress of a new city, living situation and first year teaching. So I plugged through, paddled when I could, raced when I had the time and energy. Results definitely dwindled. How could the sport that gave me such joy and happiness for so many years seem like a chore? Turns out it wasn't stress, it wasn't just me ... it was Type 1 Diabetes. The doctors call me an "interesting case". They believe that since I was an early teen, my pancreas has slowly shut down on me. Meaning that I was still producing insulin but over the years it decreased little by little until finally when I stopped training 6 days a week in March 2004, the symptoms became readily apparent. Extreme fatigue, excessive thirst, killer headaches that never went away, difficulty concentrating; they were all there except I didn't even think that what I was going through was Diabetes.

During my annual physical, my doc ran some extra tests and sent me for blood work. When she called me into her office a few days later and told me that I had Diabetes, I was floored! I started an education program in Toronto to learn about life with Type 2 Diabetes. I did my best to lower the amount of carbohydrates in my diet and increase my exercise but it didn't seem to matter what I did, my sugars were always high. Finally I got into see an Endocrinologist. After taking a medical history and chatting for a while, she decided that I didn't have Type 2 Diabetes. She wanted to start me on insulin injections that day because she was positive that I had Type 1 and would do a blood test to confirm.

That day in February 2007 my life was handed back to me. Yes I have a chronic disease but I can function again. I feel better than I have since childhood. The drive that I exhibited by throwing myself into learning everything I could about Diabetes and what I had to do to manage it and paddle was noticed by many of my medical team. I soon became a case study for a couple of Diabetes Educators. I got back into paddling and started having troubles with hypoglycemia on the water. I tried all kinds of adjustments to my insulin, I even stopped taking it period to try and avoid the lows I was having from paddling. I didn't want anything to keep me off the water. My Diabetes team recommended that I try an insulin pump, that it would give me better control. So I started shopping around the different companies. Sure enough, the rep from one of the companies recognized me from helping her and her Yukon River Quest North Canoe team one day out in Toronto Harbour! I had paddled by them one day and chatted with them and gave them some tips and even gave them one of my old carbon paddles! Right there, I was sold, but even better, they were the only company with a waterproof pump. Done.

For almost two years I have been on an insulin pump managing my diabetes and getting back into paddling. When I was diagnosed, I set out on a three year plan. I figured it would take me three years to get myself back up to competition shape. Year one was to lose the weight and just get back onto the water. My 2007 season went pretty well, it was so easy to paddle now that I actually had energy!

Year two was to get as much time on the water as I could. Mission accomplished and then some! In 2008 I did quite a few outrigger races and surprised myself at my results. I raced in Ontario, British Columbia, California and even Hawaii. I had the privilege of representing Canada at the IVF Va'a Sprint Championships in Sacramento. I placed fourth in the Open Womens 500m. Also came home with some hardware, 3 silvers (Open Womens V6 500m, 1500m and V12 500m). Shortly after returning from Worlds, I went to Kona, Hawaii for the 18 mile Queen Lil'iloalani OC6 Race. Through connections I made in Sacramento, I managed to land an OC1 for the 5mile race on my last day there. It was sometime between the massive number of boats on the startline and the dolphins crisscrossing beneath my hull that it all came together for me. This is how it's supposed to be, I can do anything I put my mind to. Why not? In both Hawaii and in Sacramento I found myself explaining Diabetes to a lot of people. It's kind of hard NOT to notice a white patch on my stomach with a tube coming out of it going into what looks like a cell phone/mp3 player. Many people ask what it is and I have various interesting responses (my external pancreas, my direct music player, my life support system, etc) but it all came back to helping people understand that I don't have the same thing as their 300 pound uncle. That there is a difference between the Diabetes that you hear about through the media and what I have. What you hear about in the media is Type 2 Diabetes. This is the condition associated with overweight, sedentary people that eat too much and sit around all day. Their bodies still produce insulin but their tissues just can't use it very effectively anymore. This condition can be controlled through diet and exercise in many cases but may also require pills and/or insulin to get under control.

Type 1 Diabetes is the disease where your immune system sees the insulin producing beta cells of the pancreas as foreign, so it attacks them thus decreased to no insulin production. Insulin injections are necessary for survival. This is most often diagnosed in children but is starting to be diagnosed more frequently in people in their 20s.

All this talking to people about Diabetes really made me happy. Everyone knows someone affected by Diabetes, so it felt really good to clear up misconceptions and educate people on the facts. I made it known to my contacts at my insulin pump company, Animas Canada that I'd like to be more active in the Diabetes community. They were quite interested in my paddling right from the start, especially when I qualified for the World Championships. They loved my positive outlook on Diabetes and how enthusiastic I was about sports. They sponsored me to attend the Diabetes Exercise and Sport Association conference that was held here in Toronto last year. There I met the Senior Marketing Manager for Animas and had the opportunity to talk to numerous other athletes living and succeeding with Diabetes. I felt at home, these people understood. The day I returned from Worlds, I filmed a promotional video for Animas. The ad campaign went live online in January. www.animas.ca/Leanne if you want to check it out. In the fall I was asked if I



could fill in for a guy that has climbed Everest for a talk in Peterborough at the last moment. Why not? It was great! Talking about how a pump has helped me and that even with Diabetes, you can accomplish anything you can think of.

That experience along with educating a ton of people at Worlds about Diabetes really sparked a fire within me. I really want people with Diabetes to know that we are not different, there's no need to hold back. Go at life full force.

So now we're onto year three of the plan, 2009. Started back weight training for the first time since my university shot put days. I'm training with the National Premier Womens Dragon Boat team in preparation for the World Dragon boat Championships this August in Prague. Despite some injuries setting me back, preseason paddling has already given me a boost of confidence for the upcoming season. I just returned from an outrigger camp in Kailua, Hawaii. While down there I had the opportunity to do a few races, the last race of their OC1 season and the Oahu Championships. These paddlers are near their peak for the State Championships and the World Championships in April. Somehow, without being in a boat since the fall, I managed to keep pace. Came home with a gold, a bronze and some sweet Hawaiian swag. I've been officially sponsored by Animas for training and am currently seeking further sponsorship from other companies. Why sponsorship? Well, it all comes back to the question "Why Not?" I came 4th in the World, and that was when I was only in phase 2 of training. What am I capable of if I'm actually trained? So I'm taking a sabbatical from teaching, leaving my life here in Toronto, loading up my boats, packing up my life into my car and driving west. I plan to spend the next year training for the next IVF Worlds in New Caledonia May 2010. Why can't a Canadian girl with Type 1 Diabetes who stepped into her first racing canoe because of a cute boy in grade 11 chemistry class be World Champion?