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No Limits: Living with Tourette Syndrome

By Jennifer Wake



Nick VanHole Photo Jennifer Wake

Earning honors and fulfilling leadership roles at a school of American Kenpo Karate - a martial art which emphasizes creative expression of various self-defense concepts through physical, mental, and spiritual training - is something Lafayette resident Nick VanHole says simply reflects his knowledge and experience, and underscores his dedication as a practitioner of martial arts. But Kenpo Karate has also been an outlet for VanHole, a way to harness the energy he feels before a sharp, twitchy right arm tic - one of the symptoms of Tourette Syndrome he has dealt with since his diagnosis 22 years ago.

Like many "touretters" diagnosed with the condition that causes involuntary motor and vocal actions referred to as tics, VanHole says activities like karate can relieve his symptoms and the energy connected to them, offer a little break from it all, and put his tics towards greater purposes.

"For me, like many others, my symptoms often do recede once I'm involved in some activity which simultaneously involves both mental and physical action," says the former Kenpo instructor. "Although the tics and touretic energy that I experience are truly involuntary, over time I've been able to grasp a greater sense of control over them and, through my own breathing and habit-reversal techniques, have attempted to direct my tics and touretic energies towards whatever ends I choose."

"Overall, due to impact from tics, I'm certainly not a physically gentle person," he adds, "but sometimes I like a break from it."

While VanHole loves sparring, freestyle skiing, and fly fishing, he also has his more cerebral side, having worked as an archivist intern at Yellowstone Historic Center and as a visitor services representative intern at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He currently works independently as a contract researcher, aspiring to continue his involvement in the field of disabilities education/studies and historical research after earning his bachelor's and master's degrees in history from the University of Montana.

In his master's thesis, "Shared Consciousness: A Social History of Tourette Syndrome and its Treatments," VanHole describes the history of Tourette Syndrome treatments and the evolution of personal management strategies to alleviate motor tics such as head jerks or flailing limbs, or vocal tics such as tongue clicking, clearing of the throat or prolonged screeching. He explores the evolution of treatments beginning in the 1800s that included public shamings, the use of blistering agents and even leeches to the treatments of today that include biofeedback techniques and the use of certain medications.

"My writing was never meant to sensationalize outlandish treatments and clinical theories of the past," he says, "but rather to make sense of the events and circumstances that led up to the varieties of touretic experiences that exist today."

For VanHole, writing his thesis was an incredible journey. "While I understand myself to be part of the social whole in which I wrote of, and know that I have a right to my own experiences, I really enjoyed taking a step back from the big picture to write an intriguing but impartial history," he says.

One conclusion he intends readers to draw from the history is that the meaning of Tourette's is different for everyone.

"Reading and listening to the experiences of hundreds of other people with the same underlying condition convinced me that, as people with disabilities, our situations might give us an understanding of life that many may never come to know," he says. "Our conditions often force us to explore very deep into our minds, emotions, and critical aspects of life."

VanHole considers sympathy towards someone with Tourette's to be an "unnecessary sentiment." He says his parents, sisters, wife, in-laws and friends played an integral role in shaping who he is today.

"Their indifference towards my tics and symptoms carries a sense of beauty that is genuine and pure," he says. "Even while very young, my parents trusted me with my own decisions regarding how I handled my Tourette's. Through their guidance they gave me the tools to handle any situation in life to the best of my ability, and Tourette's was simply treated as another situation - a unique one, to be sure, but just another situation nevertheless.

"For this, and so much more, I consider myself an extremely fortunate person."

"Shared Consciousness: A Social History of Tourette Syndrome and its Treatments," can be viewed online at

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[back](#)

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