

HollyRod Foundation Targets Parkinson's Disease

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—Holly Robinson Peete.**

by Sibylla Nash

Unexpected, long-term illness can be both physically and financially devastating. But those afflicted with Parkinson's disease may not be overwhelmed by their medical and financial burdens thanks to actress Holly Robinson Peete's HollyRod Foundation.

Parkinson's disease, a progressive disorder of the central nervous system, annually affects 1.5 million Americans (usually over the age of 50). Only 10 percent of Parkinson's cases are found in those younger than age 40, 20 percent of cases are found in those between ages 40 and 50, and 70 percent of the cases are found in those age 50 and older. The average age at onset is between 58 and 62. Symptoms may include stiffness, tremors, slowness and reduced movement, difficulty in walking, difficulty with balance, and depression. While it is not a fatal disease, there is no cure. It is controllable through expensive medication. Certain generic drugs can cost upwards of \$800.

Enter HollyRod, a nonprofit organization that distributes money and medication directly to those in need who have been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

"We want to work with pharmaceutical companies and get medication directly into the hands of individuals," says Robinson Peete of the foundation she established in 1997. Since its founding, HollyRod has raised \$100,000 through grants from corporations such as American Express, Redkin and Novartis, a pharmaceutical company, as well as through fundraising. The actress and her NFL quarterback husband, Rodney Peete, recently opened their home to host a fashion show fundraiser for the organization.

While many celebrities will champion a charity because it's the "in" cause of the month, Robinson Peete chose Parkinson's because it hit very close to home. Her father, television produc-



Holly and Rodney Peete

er Matthew Robinson, was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 1982.

"My dad was in denial for 10 years, he's much worse off than he should be," says Robinson Peete, who acts as caregiver for her father. "He didn't grab it by the horns and aggressively deal with it." Through HollyRod, she hopes to prevent others from making the same mistake.

Robinson Peete, the mother of twin 2-year-olds and star of WB-TV's "For Your Love," labors tirelessly to tend to needs of family, career and Foundation, saying, "I didn't want to give it to someone to run. I wanted it to be hands-on." Eventually, she would like to establish HollyRod centers nationwide to aid people with the disease through therapy and drug maintenance. The centers will also be designed to raise mainstream awareness about Parkinson's and

what can be done to support those suffering with the disease.

"Our goal is to educate people about the disease when they're diagnosed," says Robinson Peete. "They can help themselves by doing physical therapy, speech therapy and occupational therapy. We need to make sure that people know the sooner they start approaching it the better off they will be ... that they have an opportunity to head things off at the pass."

The families of Parkinson's patients are also in dire need of education about this crippling disease says Robinson Peete, recalling a letter from a woman who "didn't know what her uncle had." The uncle, says Robinson Peete, was bedridden for "almost three years before he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease." Armed with letters from the families of Parkinson's patients, she approaches the pharmaceutical companies and asks for the donation of medicine. For the successful actress, it's all in a day's work.

For more information about the HollyRod Foundation, call (310) 385-1598 or visit their Web site at www.hollyrod.org. **TP**