

Spotlight on Volunteers

Family Matters

One amputee seeks to stop the cycle of diabetes

by Élan Young

George Austin was in his mid-30s when diabetes started knocking on his door. First, he noticed his calf muscle was sore after tennis games – an early sign of poor circulation. Then came excessive thirst. Finally, when he dropped 40 pounds in 6 months, he decided to go to the doctor. In 1985, the year he was diagnosed with diabetes, Austin was promoted at State Farm Insurance to superintendent in charge of two states and 75 employees. He was under additional stress, which may have triggered the onset of type 2 diabetes.

“After looking at my family history, the doctor prescribed oral medication,” Austin recalls. “But he also said, ‘You may not outrun this thing.’” Austin was no stranger to amputation. Both his maternal grandmother and his mother lost limbs from diabetes. In 2001, at the age of 53, he became the third person in his family to lose a limb from the disease.

Because Austin is African American, he was twice as likely to acquire type 2 diabetes as a Caucasian. (Type 2 results from a condition where the body doesn’t use insulin properly.) The American Diabetes Association (ADA) reports that the number of African Americans with diabetes has tripled since the 1960s. According to the ADA, type 2 diabetes is more

common in adults who are over 45, have diabetes in their family, are overweight, don’t exercise and have cholesterol problems.

Fortunately, diabetes can be controlled easily if caught in its early stages, usually

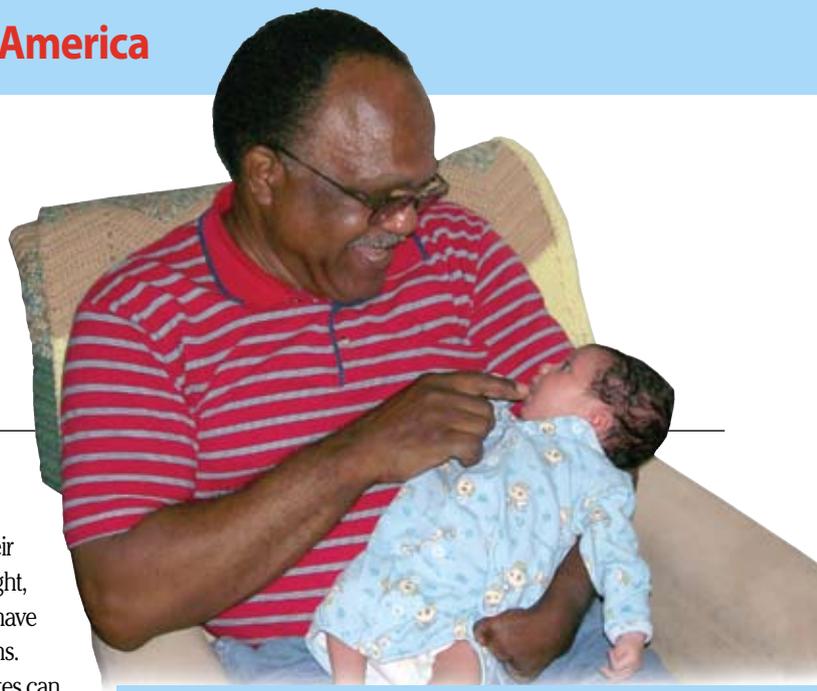
by making lifestyle changes. Unfortunately, diabetes frequently goes unchecked. It’s been estimated that for every African American with the disease, another goes undiagnosed. If diagnosed in the later stages, people with diabetes will need prescription pills or insulin injections to control their blood sugar fluctuations.

When the symptoms pile up, such as blurred vision, neuropathy and kidney disease, it can sometimes be too late, which makes it the fourth-leading cause of death in the African American community. Since diabetes is the leading cause of nontraumatic lower-extremity amputations in America, African Americans are also more likely than Caucasians to experience diabetes-related amputations.

Austin’s doctor helped him get back on track. But managing the disease still requires him to wake up every morning and check his blood sugar, manage insulin injections and monitor everything he eats. “I go to an endocrinologist every 3 months,” he says. “Fortunately, my diabetes is pretty much under control now.”

Many people with diabetes discover that family is a motivating factor to keep up with their regimen and adopt more healthful habits. Family and friends are not only potential cheerleaders, but also personal reminders of what’s at stake.

With a son and a newborn granddaughter, he also wants to take care of himself for their sakes. Because they are genetically susceptible to the disease, Austin tries to get his son to take a preventive stance.



George Austin, holding his granddaughter Makenna, hopes to stop the cycle of diabetes in his family. Photo by Brian Austin

“I urge my son to get his blood sugar tested whenever he makes a trip to the doctor. I tell him to watch his diet, and especially to watch the alcohol,” says Austin. “A social drink is fine, but alcohol is sugar and it’s not good for you.”

Austin’s dedication to others goes beyond his love for family. Living with an amputation and managing diabetes has given Austin hope that he might be able to reach out to strangers with the same message. In November 2007, he joined the Amputee Coalition of America’s (ACA’s) Volunteer Outreach Team (VOT), a team of amputees who desire to represent the ACA in their communities and at national events and conferences.

His sole objective for joining this team of volunteers was to try to educate people about diabetes and reduce the number of diabetes-related amputations. “I think I have a lot to share with people because of my history with diabetes,” he says. “I want to share the things I’ve gone through and empower others to take the best route.”

Even though Austin learned about diabetes the hard way, he is happy with the gains he’s made in fighting such a persistent and difficult disease. It’s something he clearly takes joy in sharing with others. “Life is so much better now that I know what I have to do to keep my blood sugar under control. I stay away from as much sugar as I possibly can,” he says. “Oh, and I just bought a treadmill!” ■