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Hope Fund: A lifetime of seizures can't dim man's zest for life

Aging car not reliable for job shuttle, doctor appointments

By Amber Lake Tue, Dec 23, 2014 @ 7:30 pm | updated Tue, Dec 23, 2014 @ 7:54 pm



Will.Dickey@jacksonville.com
Brandon Smith, photographed in his home on Dec. 8, lost his job because of epilepsy. He has a degree in Ministry and Biblical studies.

On a good day, Brandon J. Smith of Green Cove Springs experiences only a handful of small seizures known as petit mal.

But on bad days, he can have up to 10 to 12 an hour.

During these small seizures, the 46-year-old Smith "blanks out." They are abrupt, last only a few seconds and result in a lapse of awareness.

Smith says these small seizures feel like he is being electrocuted and after a while they become exhausting. He developed them shortly after birth when he briefly stopped breathing and his brain was deprived of oxygen.

But he's never let the seizures define him. Or limit him.

"You take what you get and learn how to live

with it," he says.

While most of the seizures are mild and mostly undetectable, they still prohibit Smith from working in manual labor jobs. He had been working as a janitor until the seizures recently forced him to stop.

He is currently trying to make ends meet through his disability income and his wife Kathryn's income as a speech clinician with the Clay County schools.

The couple lives with Smith's mother, who recently returned to work to help cover expenses.

"We live paycheck to paycheck," Smith said. "And sometimes not even that."

The most pressing problem is keeping the couple's car, which is the family's sole source of transportation.

The tires are balding, and the couple worries that the vehicle may not be reliable enough to meet the demands of getting Kathryn Smith to work and her husband to his doctor appointments.

Despite the mounting obstacles, Smith remains optimistic. That trait has been part of his character since childhood. Smith says his parents taught him to work with his problems, rather than simply be a victim to them.

"From an early age, my mom and my dad instilled in me not to use epilepsy as an excuse,"

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he says.

In addition to his epilepsy, Smith has a mild form of dwarfism that's caused him to stand less than five feet tall. Yet he has long been active in sports, playing everything from soccer to basketball as a child.

"It helped me learn discipline," he says of overcoming his physical challenges to participate in sports.

It's a sense of perseverance that Smith, a personable man who has earned more than one degree, hopes to encourage in others who also face daunting challenges day after day.

"Don't let [anything] stop you," he says.

Brandon Smith doesn't plan to, either.

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