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FRONTLINE EXPLORES LIFE WITH PARKINSON'S DISEASE
FRONTLINE presents
My Father, My Brother, and Me
Tuesday, February 3, 2009, at 9 P.M. ET on PBS
Pre-release online Thursday, January 29, 2009

www.pbs.org/frontline/parkinsons
Live online discussion about Parkinson's disease with correspondent Iverson at 10 P.M. ET following broadcast

In 2004, FRONTLINE correspondent Dave Iverson received the same news that had been delivered to his father and older brother years earlier: He had Parkinson's disease, a degenerative neurological disorder that affects more than 1 million Americans, the causes of which remain largely unknown and the cure for which has proved frustratingly elusive.

In *My Father, My Brother, and Me*, a FRONTLINE co-production with ITVS, airing Feb. 3, 2009, at 9 P.M. ET on PBS (check local listings), Iverson sets off on a personal journey to understand the disease that has taken such a toll on his family. Along the way, he meets some remarkable people—a leading Parkinson's researcher whose encounter with "frozen" heroin addicts led to a major breakthrough; a Parkinson's sufferer given a new lease on life by an experimental brain surgery; and a geneticist who helped identify some of the gene mutations responsible for Parkinson's and who is now working on drugs to fix them.

Iverson, who co-produces and directs the film with Michael Schwarz, also has intimate conversations with fellow Parkinson's sufferers actor Michael J. Fox and writer Michael Kinsley, who describe how they became caught up in the politics of Parkinson's research after the Bush administration greatly restricted federal funding for promising stem cell research in 2001, three years before Iverson got his diagnosis.

"When you're talking about the potential to heal and cure, and it's not going forward because of its value as a political wedge issue," Fox says of his reaction to the Bush stem cell restrictions, "it pissed me off, and I wanted to do something." In speaking

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about the funding restrictions that President-elect Obama has signaled he might soon reverse, Michael Kinsley tells Iverson, “Six years have gone by [since the stem cell restrictions were imposed], and those are pretty important years for people like me.” At the same time, Iverson talks to others like the syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer, who suffers from a spinal cord injury. While Krauthammer is generally supportive of stem cell research, from which he might directly benefit, he believes President Bush drew an important moral line in the sand. “The fact that [an embryonic stem cell] has the potential to become human, and if unmolested and implanted it will become human, deserves a certain kind of respect,” he says.

Until recently, genetics was thought to play no real role in Parkinson’s disease at all, but Iverson’s family history leads him to enroll in a genetic study at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, Fla. To date, researchers have identified at least six genes where mutations can cause Parkinson’s, and while the familial form of the disease remains unusual, it may provide researchers with a ready-made target to fix the genes. “We’re a lot closer than we were 10 years ago,” says Mayo Clinic geneticist Matthew Farrer, “a lot closer.”

Finding a cure for Parkinson’s disease may still be on the distant horizon, but in the interim, millions of Americans find ways to live with the condition. Iverson examines one of the experimental surgical interventions that attempts to compensate for the lack of dopamine that characterizes Parkinson’s: a fetal brain cell transplant. “Now we talk about the concept of brain repair,” says surgeon Dr. Ivar Mendez. “Brain repair, when I was in medical school, was not even something that was thought about. So we have advanced tremendously over these years to be able to understand there’s the possibility that we can potentially repair the brain.” While some forms of fetal cell transplant surgery appear to have yielded positive results, others have proved disappointing, in some cases even making patients worse. Dr. Bill Langston of the Parkinson’s Institute tells Iverson: “There’s an old saying in science that research is the process of going up alleys to see if they’re blind. And more often than not they are. But that’s what we do.”

Toward the end of the film, Iverson finds a new source of hope in a very unlikely place: new research that indicates that regular exercise may help delay or slow down the progression of Parkinson's. Says one leading researcher: "It's not at all hard for me to imagine that the results of a properly designed exercise program are going to be more effective than many of the medications and surgeries we have now."

My Father, My Brother, and Me is a Kikim Media Production for WGBH/FRONTLINE and the Independent Television Service (ITVS). The film is produced and directed by Dave Iverson and Michael Schwarz. The correspondent is Dave Iverson. FRONTLINE is produced by WGBH Boston and is broadcast nationwide on PBS. Funding for FRONTLINE is provided through the support of PBS viewers with additional funding from the Park Foundation. Major funding for FRONTLINE and for this program is provided by The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Additional funding for *My Father, My Brother, and Me* is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. FRONTLINE is closed-captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers and described for people who are blind or visually impaired by the Media Access Group at WGBH. FRONTLINE is a registered trademark of WGBH Educational Foundation. The executive producer of ITVS is Sally Jo Fifer. The executive producer of FRONTLINE is David Fanning.

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