Good Golly, Miss Holly!

Actress Holly Robinson Peete formed Hollyrod to help people with Parkinson's disease—and to honor her father's memory. BY SUSANNAH GORA



e loved watching her on the iconic '80s television show 21 Jump Street and on the '90s comedy series Hangin' With Mr. Cooper. But off-screen is where actress Holly Robinson Peete plays her most important role—as a tireless advocate for people suffering from Parkinson's disease.

Along with her husband, former NFL quarterback Rodney Peete, she is the founder of Hollyrod (hollyrod.org), a foundation that provides financial, medical, and emotional support to people with Parkinson's. Peete's connection to the disease is deeply personal: She saw her late father, television writer Matthew Robinson, debilitated by it.

Holly's is a busy life—she and Rodney have four kids, she co-hosts (along with her husband) a daily talk show on XM 156 (Meet The Peetes), she's an author, and she still acts. Yet Peete found the time to talk to Neurology Now about her career, the effect Parkinson's has had on her family, and why she works so hard to make life better for people with this debilitating disease.

NEUROLOGY NOW How did Parkinson's disease first enter your life? **HOLLY ROBINSON PEETE** In 1985, my dad dropped me off for my freshman year in college at Sarah Lawrence. As he was walking away I noticed this limp. My dad wrote for a lot of sitcoms, like The Cosby Show and Sanford and Son, so I cracked a joke. I said, "Hey Dad, why are you walking like Fred Sanford?" And

he said, "Don't worry about me, just get your work done and graduate or you'll be running a junk yard too [like Sanford]." We laughed about it. But by the time I got home for Christmas that year, he had a case of Bell's palsy. Ultimately, he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. He was only in his early-to-mid 40s.

NN What was it like to get that diagnosis back then?

HRP There was no Internet, no Google, no Michael J. Fox or Muhammad Ali to lead the way. It was a very bleak time to be diagnosed. During the first 10 years of having his illness, there was a lot of denial.

PROUD HANDS Holly holds a copy of Proud Hands, a book of stories by people living with Parkinson's disease. She wrote the forward to the book, which is available at proudhandsbook.com.

NN How did meeting your husband change your outlook on the situation?



HRP When Rodney and I got married, my dad could barely get me down the aisle. But I would get letters from people whose relatives were curled up in a ball because they couldn't afford their medication. Rodney said to me, "Holly, we're the lucky ones—imagine if we didn't have these great jobs and we couldn't afford to take care of him."

NN *Is that how your foundation was born?*

HRP That's when the Hollyrod foundation started, with my husband saying, "We've got to help some of these other people." We just started randomly paying people's drug bills, because insurance companies weren't covering them. It was about \$900 dollars a month for these medications.

NN Does insurance not cover Parkinson's meds?

HRP Insurance often considers Parkinson's to be a pre-existing condition, depending on the policy. It is very difficult to get the drugs paid for. The health care crisis deeply affects those who are disadvantaged, or disenfranchised, when they get Parkinson's. So that became the mission of Hollyrod. We started paying people's bills, and getting them the medications they needed so they could go to work.

NN What were your fundraising events like when the foundation first started?

HRP We threw a little fundraiser in the backyard, invited around 50 friends, and raised about \$50,000. Now, 10 years later, our tenth annual event in Malibu will be in front of 600 people. We've got fashion shows and concerts, and really great people have come on board.

NN Did your father die from Parkinson's?

HRP I lost my dad five years ago, to complications from Parkinson's. He was only 66 but you would've thought he was 89. His body was so rigid, racked with Parkinson's, and he had severe dementia. I was very pregnant when he passed away, and literally the stress of him dying sent me into early labor. But it made me more determined to put as much muscle as I could behind Hollyrod.

NN Your foundation is not focused on finding a cure for Parkinson's—Hollyrod's mission is about helping people live their daily lives. How did you decide to design the foundation around that goal?

HRP It was a very conscious decision to focus purely on quality on life. Most of the Parkinson's foundations have been about finding a cure—which I believe will happen. But we've had kind of an anti-science president in office for eight years, so it's been hard to get some legislation through for stem cell research. In the meantime, you've got all these people who have Parkinson's—over a million of them—many who can't afford to live with it. So we decided to focus on those who



HOLLY'S HITS 21 Jump Street (Dustin Nguyen, Holly Robinson Peete, Peter DeLuise, Johnny Depp, Steven Williams); Hangin' with Mr. Cooper (Holly Robinson, Mark Curry).

could not afford to take care of themselves. We always support our sister organizations, like the Michael J. Fox Foundation and the Muhammad Ali Parkinson Center, because we do feel a cure is important. But until it comes, there are people who have to live every day, and can't afford to.

NN So much of the focus of Hollyrod is helping people afford their Parkinson's medications. How would you describe the difference that medication makes in the life of a Parkinson's patient?

HRP Parkinson's is a depletion of dopamine in the brain. And if you don't have the medication, you can freeze up, like in the movie *Awakenings*. You're not able to function physically—as if your brain can't tell the rest of the body to move. There is rigidity of limbs and dyskinesia [involuntary movements]. The different medications are there to help unlock the body, so you can do the littlest things—like button a button or raise a spoon to your mouth. These medications are crucial.

NN Sometimes people think of Parkinson's as a disease that mainly affects the elderly, but that's not accurate, is it?

HRP It's not just your grandfather's disease. Younger people, in their 40s and 50s, in the prime of their lives [are getting Parkinson's].

NN How are some of the ways Hollyrod does its work?

HRP We partner with the USC Keck School of Medicine. We have a Compassionate Care center there where people can go and get medications. There is often a period of time until Medicare kicks in. I've heard from different people that we've been able to get them over that hump.

NN What were Parkinson's medications like in the 1980s, when your dad first started suffering from the disease? How have the medicines changed since then?

HRP When my dad was diagnosed, there was Sinemet, which was the main medication. It was basically a synthetic form of dopamine. And that was it. At least I didn't see many other drug therapies. Now you have Azilect and Mirapex, for example. Back then, the only thing you could do was keep changing up the dosage. I was talking about this with Michael J. Fox recently—we stay in contact about how he's doing with his Parkinson's—

and it's just always about trying to trick the body by introducing a new drug, or taking a different dosage at different times.

NN Are you worried about being genetically at risk for Parkinson's because your father suffered from the disease? And if so, do you make lifestyle changes based upon that?

HRP Well, one area where you can really help yourself is exercising. I get a little obsessive about exercising. Both my brother and I are hovering around the age my father was when he got it. So we are always looking for any kind of little tremor or nervous tic. We get a little, "Oh my gosh, are we gonna get it too?" because there does seem to be a genetic predisposition. But we also know we have the good fortune of understanding so much more about it than my dad did 20 years ago.

NN How would you say your mother [Hollywood talent manager Dolores Robinson] has helped you and your family through the challenges of Parkinson's?

HRP My mom and my dad divorced pretty early. He wasn't so great to her during her marriage to him. But she was the last person to be with him and see him alive. She was rubbing his feet and talking about the old days. She was the best ex-wife I have ever seen in my life. A lot of women hang on to bitterness, and my mom let that go as soon as she saw that he was really struggling. She was such a great friend to him. His last memory was this: She flew in five of his best college and high school buddies, and she played Ray Charles, which was his favorite singer, and she made his favorite foods, giving him the experience of a lifetime. She was there for him when he really needed it. It was a lesson in forgiveness and unconditional love that I'll never forget.

NN That really is special. So what are some of Hollyrod's main fundraising events today?

HRP Our events are the signature of the Hollyrod foundation. When you have celebrity status and celebrity friends, that is a way to galvanize funds and entertain sponsors and corporations that might want to rub elbows. It's all good. This is our tenth year. We're so fortunate. Every year we have a different fashion designer for Design Care, our local event in L.A. We beg somebody who has a beautiful house to let us invade their home. This year we'll be in Malibu, at a beautiful property, and Ungaro will

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be our fashion house. I am a constant promoter, calling record companies to see who is not on tour and who has a philanthropic budget. It's sometimes a bit dizzying, but the events are really key. And then Rodney and I get on stage and do our little Sonny and Cher thing. It's really fun—it's not your same old "rubber chicken event." We're really proud of it. We have some amazing friends who show up for us every year. And for our event called Gridiron Glamour we partner with the local Super Bowl city. That is much more difficult to do. We could be in Tampa or Phoenix or Houston—you always have to connect locally.

NN You lead a very busy life! How do you find time to organize the events?

HRP It's a difficult thing to do, because I have four kids and I still act every now and then. But every time I think that I want to clear this off my plate, a sponsor will call me, like Target or IMG, and will ask what's happening for next year. So I just gotta keep moving forward.

NN So many of us grew up watching you on television, and in particular, on the show 21 Jump Street. What do you remember when you look back on your years playing Detective Judy Hoffs on that series? HRP I loved being a part of a show that kicked off a new network. Fox barely had any affiliates at that time and it was unchartered territory. We went up to Vancouver to work on it, and this guy got fired and was replaced by a new guy named Johnny Depp. There were some good, good, times in the beginning, and then eventually Johnny hated doing the show and he kind of ruined it for everybody. But at the beginning we had the time of our lives. We did shows that covered topics that now we roll our eyes at, but at the time we had to beg the network to greenlight shows about AIDS in school, guns in school, school shootings way before Columbine-and teen suicide, and kids struggling with their sexuality. We were really ahead of the curve. That was probably the most gratifying part of it. I am proud to be part of a show that really shaped people's lives. I saw Johnny a couple of years back, at the Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards.



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forgiveness and unconditional love that I'll never forget. ??

NN Oh? What happened there?

HRP He had just been slimed, and I was like, "I guess you're taking yourself a bit less seriously these days!" He said, "Yeah, kids will do that to you." Now he's an attraction at Disneyland. I love it. We've all come full circle.

NN Another television series that people loved watching you on was Hangin' With Mr. Cooper. One of your castmates was Raven Symone, who now is a superstar [thanks in large part to her Disney Channel show, That's So Raven]. Are your kids fans of hers?

HRP I play reruns of *Hangin'* with Mr. Cooper so my kids think I was cool. I worked with Raven Symone and Captain Jack Sparrow [Depp's character in *Pirates of the Caribbean*]—those were cool points with my kids! And Raven was the flower girl in my wedding. We've been in touch all these years. I adore her and she is the platinum standard on how to survive show business without going to rehab. I'm so proud of her and everything she does.

NN You also starred in a TV series that must've been pretty close to your heart: Football Wives. Was that fun?

HRP It was the best experience, and I'm still upset that they didn't pick it up.

NN Why do you think they didn't?

HRP Ultimately, the NFL strong-armed the networks. This was during the Michael Vick [dog-fighting] drama, and they were very image-conscious. It was explained to [the NFL] that no, it's about the wives, but they didn't buy it. Basically, the networks get huge ratings with the NFL's games, so [the NFL] was able to come in and make [Football Wives] go away. But it was sure fun to shoot, and I was looking forward to this character because she was like none I had ever played. She was a hot mom who gets it on with the quarterback—you know I was excited about that! It was like Dynasty, really fun. And I think they missed the boat on it.

NN You also wrote a book that helps women understand football: Get Your Own Damn Beer—I'm Watching The Game! A Woman's Guide to Loving Pro Football. What was the inspiration behind that? HRP Girlfriends who would call me during the game. I almost called the book Girlfriend, Don't Call Me During The Game. Besides the fact that they didn't understand that my husband was out there getting run over by 500-pounders and that I might not want to talk about what sale is going on that day, I wanted them to understand the basics. Sometimes men can describe the basics in a very condescending way. But it was also a tribute to my dad. He loved football so much—he was

a huge Philadelphia Eagles fan [Rodney Peete was the Eagles' quarterback for years] and I grew up at his knee learning the game. Football helped define who my dad was.

NN What else are you working on now, career-wise?

HRP Rodney and I are on the radio every day, on Oprah and Friends—XM 156—on a show called Meet the Peetes. It's a bit reality radio. We talk about everything: our kids, parenting, marriage, family, politics, and current events. It's always interesting and therapeutic, kind of like a couple's therapy session. We do it out of our house. So there is a reality aspect to it—about what's going on in this crazy house! It's been fun because we have been able to put forth our philanthropic brand and talk about things that are impor-

NN How does radio compare with your on-camera work?

HRP Radio is definitely a different muscle. I thought, coming from 20 years of doing TV, that if I just wake up and roll out of bed and don't have to put on makeup—like, how hard could it be? It's actually much harder than I thought. But I really enjoy it. We are on every day on the East coast from 1 to 2 p.m. And we are hoping that eventually we may get syndicated.

tant to us. We think we're entertaining, and we enjoy doing it.

NN There have been a lot of movies that deal with Alzheimer's and various forms of dementia, but it seems that Parkinson's is pretty underrepresented in the media and in entertainment. Would you ever want to be part of an entertainment project that addressed Parkinson's?

HRP I have thought about that...Muhammad Ali put it so on the forefront because of that image of him with a little dyskinesia lighting the flame at the Atlanta Olympics. But there hasn't been a lot of media representation of Parkinson's. And there really should be. So I will put that on my to-do list.

NN Finally, I'm sure you know that one of today's hottest up-and-coming comic actors, Jonah Hill (from Superbad and Knocked Up), is working on developing a film version of the TV series 21 Jump Street. It's amazing that the show you were at the heart of 20 years ago has lived on, and is still beloved by today's young people.

HRP I'm hoping that 21 Jump Street: The Movie happens. Of course my agents are trying to get Detective Hoffs [involved]. I figure by now, I would at least be Commissioner Hoffs!

A frequent contributor to Neurology Now, Susannah Gora is a former Premiere Magazine editor and the author of You Couldn't Ignore Me If You Tried: The Brat Pack, Their Films, and Their Impact on a Generation, which is being published by Random House/Crown this summer.