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A QUEST TO BEAT ALS

By Susan G. Hauser

» **ALS is no joke.** But the opening shot of *Augie*, a documentary about fitness leader Augie Nieto, shows the 13-year survivor of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (also known as Lou Gehrig's disease) smiling mischievously as an electronic voice reads an off-color joke that Nieto has laboriously typed by way of his foot-operated trackball mouse.

That expression says plenty: I'm still here. I'm not giving up. And naughty jokes just crack me up.

Director James Keach, who also produced *Walk the Line*, the 2005 film about Johnny Cash, and directed *Glen Campbell: I'll Be Me*, a 2014 documentary about the late singer's struggle with Alzheimer's disease, explains Augie's surprising opener.

"Augie has a wicked sense of humor, so my first instinct was, let's start with a joke. It lets the audience know it's OK to laugh. It's OK to enjoy this man."

Nieto was 47 when he was diagnosed in March 2005. He was 10 years into his second marriage and nearly three decades into a fabulously successful career in the fitness industry, an industry he helped launch while still in college by marketing and distributing the Lifecycle. As president of Life Fitness, and with a loving wife, four kids, and a beachfront home in Corona del Mar, California, Nieto had it all.

Now, Nieto says his purpose in life has veered from being successful to being significant. He even co-wrote a 2007 book, *Augie's Quest: One Man's Journey from Success to Significance*, to help spread that message.

ALS is a disease that attacks nerve cells that control voluntary muscles. Muscle function gradually declines, while mental function is unchanged. Through the computer he operates with his toes, Nieto demonstrates that his mind rarely rests. In fact, he is working constantly to fight the disease that usually robs its victims of life within three to five years.

One year after Nieto was diagnosed, he and his wife, Lynne, launched a fundraising initiative called Augie's Quest, which has raised more than \$60 million. The 13th-annual BASH, an auction hosted by Augie's Quest to raise funds for ALS, will be held March 23 in San Diego, and once again Lynne Nieto expects to look out into the sea of faces and recognize people who were once her husband's fiercest business competitors.

"I can remember walking with Augie through trade shows," Lynne recalls, "and it was like they had lightning bolts coming out of their eyes at each other. But they are the same ones who today are supporting us. The fitness industry has really rallied behind us."

Meanwhile, she says, Augie Nieto is bringing people together to work toward a common goal. "He's taking his entrepreneurial background and applying it to a disease and approaching it as if it is a business."

He also has taken on the chairman-



Augie and Lynne Nieto.

Augie "is taking his entrepreneurial background and applying it to a disease and approaching it as if it is a business," says Lynne Nieto.

ship of the ALS Therapy Development Institute, a nonprofit biotech research facility in Cambridge, Massachusetts, whose work is supported by Augie's Quest funds.

Lynne Nieto says she hopes the film *Augie* (available March 20 on iTunes and Amazon) helps raise awareness of ALS. "It's not incurable," she says. "It's just underfunded." ✕