

the fight of their lives

Standing strong in the face of his Parkinson's disease,
Michael J. Fox and Tracy Pollan have vowed to win this battle...together.

BY SHERYL BERK • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL O'NEILL

On a sunny July afternoon in 1988 Michael J. Fox and Tracy Pollan exchanged wedding vows at a small white-clapboard country inn in Arlington, Vt. Reporters in helicopters hovered overhead trying to snap photos of the star-studded ceremony, but the happy couple seemed oblivious.

"They were so affectionate," recalls Maureen McKeon, manager of the West Mountain Inn, who organized the reception. "They stayed here several times before deciding to get married at our place. They were inseparable—always hugging, holding hands. It was clear that these two young people were meant for each other."

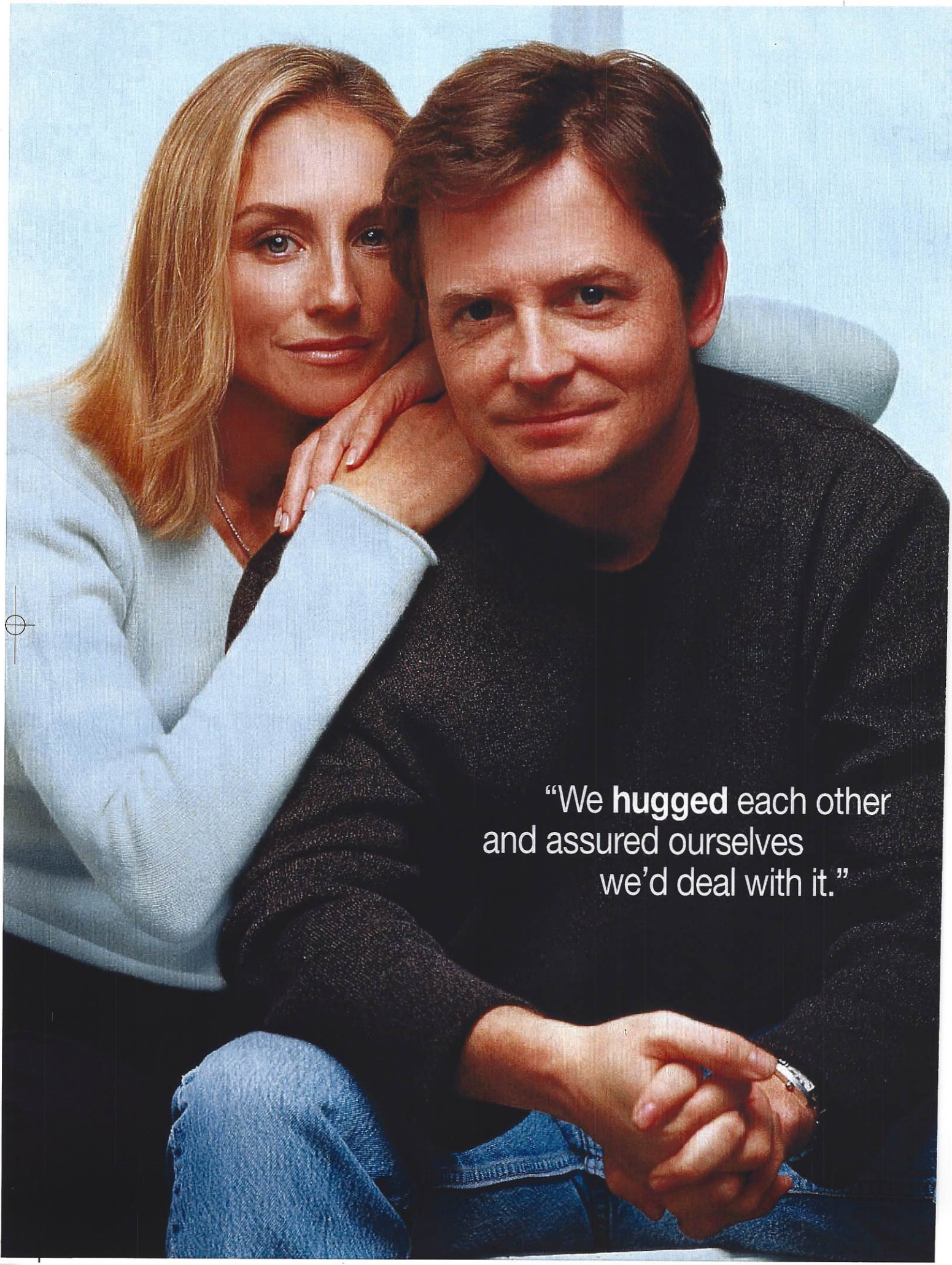
Their wedding day was filled with love and the promise of what the future would hold. Both Fox and Pollan were in their late 20s and at the top of their acting careers (Fox had won two Emmys, and his *Back to the Future* films were raking in millions; Pollan had starred in several TV movies). They had bought a sprawling farmhouse nearby and were excited about starting their own "family ties." How could they have foreseen, while honeymooning on romantic Martha's Vineyard, that only two years later Fox would be diagnosed with an incurable and crippling disease, and that their dream would turn into a nightmare?

It was in 1990, while filming *Doc Hollywood*, that Fox first complained of a strange twitch in his pinkie. After numerous tests—and several "second opinions"—doctors concluded it was Parkinson's disease, a degenerative neurological illness that afflicts more than 1 million Americans. Despite the large numbers of sufferers, Fox is in the minority; most victims are over the age of 60, and doctors say his case is rare. The diagnosis was grim and incomprehensible. Many patients in the late stages of the illness are unable to walk, speak or care for themselves, and some even suffer from dementia. Fox questioned his physicians: Had the disease been the result of a head injury he'd sustained while playing hockey or lacrosse as a teen in Vancouver, British Columbia? Or was it caused by bumps and bruises he'd incurred doing movie stunts? Doctors insisted there was no known cause—or cure.

Fox and Pollan made the decision that they would fight the disease in private, confiding in only their families and a few close friends. At first there ▶

Pollan and Fox lean on each other.

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were lots of tears, but by then the couple had a one-year-old son, Sam, to think of as well. "We hugged each other and assured ourselves we'd deal with it," Fox has said.

His biggest concern, says his neurologist, Allan Ropper, M.D., of St. Elizabeth's Medical Center in Boston, was not for his career but that he could be a normal dad and play with his kids. "Tremors make it very laborious to do daily tasks like washing hair or even dressing," Ropper adds. "They don't impair movement completely, but they do make otherwise simple things very difficult."

Medication quieted the symptoms for a while. Fox continued to work steadily, filming *Life With Mikey*, *For Love or Money*, *Greedy* and *The American President* and signing on to star in another TV series, *Spin City*, in 1996.

"Michael is remarkable," says James Lapine, who directed him in 1993's *Life With Mikey*. "It's pretty impressive how he handled the job with ease and confidence, given what was on his mind at the time."

But soon the stiffness in his hands, hips and feet and the violent tremor in his left arm became so severe that no pills could completely alleviate them—or conceal them. In March 1998, Fox opted for risky brain surgery (only 5 percent of Parkinson's patients undergo it, according to Ropper), knowing full well there was a chance of paralysis, coma or even death. "I had fears," Pollan said at the time. "But Michael had no question it would be successful."

On the day of his surgery, Fox kissed nine-year-old Sam and three-year-old twin daughters Aquinnah and Schuyler goodbye and left for Holy Family Hospital in Methuen, Mass. According to Ropper, surgeons worked for two and a half hours on Fox's brain, identifying and cauterizing malfunctioning cells. They are pleased with the results. Despite a few initial instances of slurred speech, the surgery has significantly reduced Fox's symptoms and allows him to function normally (only a few strenuous slapstick stunts for *Spin*



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City are now off-limits). Nine months after the surgery, Fox went public, bravely discussing his disease in intimate detail in *People* magazine and on TV's *20/20*.

"Michael is a very generous person," says Meredith Baxter, who played Fox's mother on *Family Ties*, "and he's always shown a willingness to accept things as they are. He looked at this trauma and said, 'It's not benefiting me to keep it a secret. It takes too much energy and effort. And could I help people—not just myself—by talking about it?' I applaud him. It required a great deal of courage."

"He raised a tremendous amount of public awareness," says Nathan Slewett, the chairman of the board of directors of the National Parkinson Foundation. "After his announcement, we had a huge increase in the number of people calling to ask about the surgery he had, since it helped him."

While Fox gives others hope and encouragement, it is Pollan who has been his strength and support from day one of the diagnosis. "Through it all, Tracy has been amazing," Fox has said. "The illness has brought us closer."

A love that triumphs over tragedy

They met on the set of *Family Ties* at the beginning of the 1985-86 season. Pollan was cast as Ellen, Alex P. Keaton's artsy and opinionated girlfriend. Fox was receiving 21,000 fan letters a week and admittedly "dating half of Holly-►

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wood," including actresses Helen Slater, Sarah Jessica Parker and Nancy McKeon. Pollan was living with her then boyfriend, Kevin Bacon. It wasn't, as many assume, a case of life imitating art. "We weren't a couple—we just played one on TV," Fox has said. But two years later, when Pollan came to audition for his film *Bright Lights, Big City*, they were both available, and sparks flew. They were engaged by that Christmas and wed seven months later. Fox was 27, and Pollan was 28.

This isn't the first crisis they've had to endure. In 1989, a crazed fan was arrested for sending Fox 5,000 letters threatening to kill the couple if he didn't divorce Pollan. Throughout the ordeal, which occurred during Pollan's first pregnancy, they remained calm and supportive of each other.

If the incident taught them anything, it was the importance of keeping their family as removed from the star scene as possible. They maintain their home in Vermont (complete with cows, sheep and horses) and an apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, and refuse to lay down L.A. digs. What they want, Fox has said, is "just a simple life at our own pace."

He says their personalities perfectly complement each other: "She sees the big picture, while I'm always stuck on the little details." Pollan showed great compassion as the illness began to take its toll. When Fox's arms and legs felt stiff, she would massage them tenderly.



When Michael met Tracy: on the set of *Family Ties* in 1985.

On Fox's "long list of positives" in his life, he has said, his wife ranks number one.

Fox's future: Happily ever after?

Now, at age 38, Michael J. Fox is in the late-mild stage of Parkinson's. If his current plans are any indication, he has a full life ahead of him. *Spin City* starts its third season this fall with Heather Locklear joining the cast as a regular. He provides the voice for the furry mouse Stuart Little in the December family film, and he's directing and starring in *Thirty Wishes*, due out next year. He is also producing a new series pilot for Pollan.

His doctor says his prognosis is excellent; the results of the surgery can control his tremors for decades. "Most people do quite well as parents when they're young because the disease is not that advanced yet," Ropper says. "At this point in time, it's a hindrance, but it's not at all life-stopping."

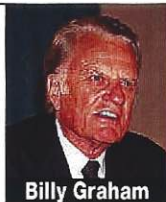
As he ages, however, Fox might reach a point where the disease becomes "quite disabling," Ropper cautions. But that day, he has assured Fox, is a long way off.

"Michael is a fighter," says Baxter. "He was always laughing when we worked together. He has a lightness of spirit that will see him through any trying times." ■

A quick look at Parkinson's

What is Parkinson's disease? It's a chronic disorder of the central nervous system that causes a reduction in dopamine, a chemical that helps regulate movement.

Who has it? Sufferers include evangelist Billy Graham, Attorney General Janet Reno and boxer Muhammad Ali.



Billy Graham



Janet Reno



Muhammad Ali

Can Parkinson's be prevented? No, but treatments are available, including:

The drug Sinemet. It contains levodopa, which converts to dopamine in the brain. Additional drugs used include Eldepryl and Symmetrel.

Physical, occupational and speech therapies. They help enhance quality of life.

Brain surgery. At this time, because of the risk, most doctors recommend an operation only for patients who have stopped responding to medication.

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