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Brian Wallach has taken his fight
against ALS as a chance to raise
hope and awareness for all.

By Brenda Sapino Jeffreys



Brian Wallach (above) “transforms hope into action better than anyone I know,” says colleague Chuck Smith.

Brian Wallach, an associate with Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom in Chicago, was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) in 2017, at age 37. Since then, Wallach has been laser-focused on using his skills as a lawyer and advocate to help find

treatments for the deadly disease and to improve the lives of those living with it.

“Brian transforms hope into action better than anyone I know,” says Chuck Smith, a Skadden litigation partner in Chicago.

Wallach and his wife, Sandra Abrevaya, whom he met while working on Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, formed a foundation, I AM ALS, a patient-led community aimed to empower those with the neurological disease to fight for cures and to bring it to an end.

ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, is fatal and patients typically live for two to five years after a diagnosis. More than 90% of people with ALS have no family history of the disease. One in 300 people will be diagnosed with it, and there is currently no cure.

The idea for the nonprofit organization came from a doctor Wallach saw in 2018 who suggested the litigator put his career training in the law and public speaking to use to fight ALS. At first, Wallach thought "no way," because he had two young kids, but he reconsidered and persuaded his wife to do the same and launch the nonprofit.

"What I saw was we were on the precipice of making real progress against ALS, which would help treatment not only for ALS, but also Parkinson's and Alzheimer's and beyond," he says.

Wallach wants to be one of the first survivors of ALS, and he knows that won't happen unless he throws himself into the fight; and he wants his daughters to see him and his wife pulling for him and others. He's had an impact.

I AM ALS has grown, and he testified twice before Congress, and his efforts helped gain support for the Accelerating Access to Critical

Therapies for ALS Act, which President Joe Biden signed into law in December 2021. The law authorized \$100 million annually for the next five years to fund early access to promising therapies for ALS.

Meanwhile, shortly after he was diagnosed, Wallach agreed to participate in a documentary, "No Ordinary Campaign," about his life living with ALS and I AM ALS. The documentary was screened around the country, including at South by Southwest in March.

Wallach's efforts led to raising millions of dollars in seed funding for I AM ALS, according to Skadden, and the organization landed several grants from and a partnership with the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative to support I AM ALS's development of organizing tools that will be made available for free to other disease advocacy organizations.

Wallach says he has continued to work on litigation and pro bono cases, including voting rights and exonerating those wrongfully convicted of murder. As his disease has progressed, he has done more pro bono work, including for I AM ALS, a client of the firm.

"One thing I've been very lucky about is that Skadden has been amazing to me. Before COVID, I went into the office every day, and after COVID, every week. Now I am able to do my work from home and then come into the office to see everyone," he says. ■