Jessica Williams runs because she can. She runs in memory of her brother, who lost his ability to run, to walk, to stand... and then to breathe. Jessica’s brother, Jeremy, was diagnosed with ALS when he was 35 years old. The disease claimed his life just three years later.

“My brother and I are just 14 months apart,” Jessica said, “so growing up, we were really close. Everyone thought we were twins. He was someone who never got sick; then all of a sudden he was diagnosed with ALS.”

ALS is a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects nerve cells in the brain and the spinal cord. The disease robs people of the ability to walk, talk and eventually breathe. It traps them inside a body they no longer can control. With no treatments or cure, the average life expectancy for someone with ALS is 2-5 years from the time of diagnosis.

When Jeremy was diagnosed with ALS, it shook the whole family. Jeremy’s parents moved from New Jersey to Vermont to be close to their son. Jeremy, his wife and two kids moved in with them, and Jessica and her two kids, as well as her brother, Justin, made the 14-hour drive from Raleigh every month to spend weeks at a time with their dying brother. Additionally, Jessica started to run.

“I kind of grew up in the gym, but have never been a runner. I’ve never enjoyed it,” Jessica said. “When Jeremy was diagnosed, my response to relieve the stress was to start running. My brother didn’t have use of his legs. He lost use of his legs and his arms. I thought, ‘I have this healthy body, and I need to use it. If he can’t run or walk, I’m going to run for him.’ So that was, from the beginning of his diagnosis, how I dealt with it. I’ve been running ever since.”

On Sunday, April 2, Jessica will run in the Humana Rock ‘n’ Roll Raleigh Half Marathon. Although she’s been running a couple of miles a day for the last several years, she still doesn’t consider herself a runner. This will be her first half marathon.

“When I was presented with this opportunity to run the half marathon, I found it very exciting and very challenging,” she said. “Actually, the one person who pushed me to do it is my mother. She called and said, ‘I will do this with you; I think you need to do it.’ My mom, who is her 60s and has never been a runner, is flying down from Vermont. My brother just passed away a year and a half ago. My parents are dealing with their own issues and I know this is something for her, too – something to look forward to, something to help her right now and to focus. ALS doesn’t stop when the person living with it passes. It continues to affect the families. ALS is life-changing for every single person involved.”

In addition to running with Team Challenge ALS in honor of Jeremy, Jessica and her mother, Theresa, also try to honor him by living each day with a positive attitude.

When Jeremy was diagnosed with ALS, the whole family was “so distraught and sad and stressed out and all the emotions that go along with that,” Jessica said. “Jeremy was literally the only person that always had a smile on his face. He brought us as a family together. He wanted his family to be around, and he wanted smiles. He taught me and everyone else such a big lesson about being positive and having strength when there’s absolutely no hope. That is amazing. I feel like I can do anything. I’m strong. And I know that the rest of my family feels the same way.”

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Rock ‘n’ Roll Raleigh Marathon and 1/2 Marathon
Sunday, April 2
www.alsnc.org

Run in Honor. Run in Memory. Run to Defeat ALS.