Was that a twitch?

Ally Bowersock watched her husband’s hands closely. Maybe she imagined that she saw a twitch.

Still, she couldn’t be sure. Any time her husband misspoke, groped for words or dropped something, Ally wondered if the nightmare scenario she dreaded was coming true.

Tyler Bowersock, a big, strong, handsome guy and former college athlete, had known since high school that he might be living under an early death sentence. He had a 50 percent chance of carrying the gene that causes Huntington’s disease, a rare, inherited illness that leads to degeneration of brain cells and the progressive loss of cognitive and motor skills. For people with Huntington’s, life is like living with Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s diseases combined.

Tyler had watched his own father die slowly from the disease, and he saw his mother struggle with the strain of around-the-clock caregiving, especially in the years when his father could no longer walk or feed himself before he died in 2012.

Looking at his feeble father, Tyler could not help but think, “that’s me in the future.”

Ally, too, had worried about the future ever since Tyler told her he might have a disease with which she was unfamiliar, despite her doctorate in education and health promotion. She wondered if they would even have a family.

“Will I be the caregiver for my husband and child simultaneously?” she wondered.

Tyler and Ally, who today live in southwest Roanoke County, made a decision together. They would marry and they would live life to the fullest — traveling, playing sports, embracing the outdoors and pursuing their careers.

“We took the glass half-full approach,” Ally said. “We had motivation to do things early. People postpone
things in life because financially or logistically they can’t do them. We decided we’d better make the most out of being healthy.”

Eventually, though, Tyler wanted to know if the death sentence was real.

‘Come to Jesus moment’

Tyler Bowersock does not look like a guy with bad genes.

At 34, he checks in at 6-foot-2 and a muscular 225 pounds. He looks like he could still pummel quarterbacks, which he did at Dayton University in a four-year career that earned him All-America and academic honors. He’s still quite the athlete.

Recently, decked out in a red sports shirt, black shorts and red Adidas running shoes, he joined a group of 25 other runners for the “Pub Run,” a weekly event where folks run or walk a couple of miles and end up at a Roanoke restaurant for food and drinks. Perhaps the only person who appeared to be in better shape was his wife.

As the evening sun beat down on the Village Grill parking lot where the runners assembled, Ally Bowersock, 32, a Culpeper native and former soccer player at Bridgewater College, pushed the couple’s 15-month-old son, T.J., in a stroller while their Brittany spaniel, Rocco, was on a leash clipped to her belt.

The run counts as family time for the Bowersocks, who are exceptionally busy these days with work and home life. Tyler, a physical therapist who has a doctorate from Ohio University, recently moved his business, University Physical Therapy, to a building in Cave Spring. Ally, the program director and an assistant professor for the Health and Exercise Science Program at Jefferson College of Health Sciences, is home with T.J. this summer, but will be back in the classroom this fall.

Fast-paced life is nothing new for the Bowersocks, who met nine years ago while both worked at the Roanoke Athletic Club, started dating a few months later and knew by their second date that they wanted to marry.

First, though, Tyler leveled with Ally. On a trip to a triathlon at Snowshoe Mountain Resort in West Virginia, when their love was still budding, he told her about his chances of having Huntington’s and the possibility that he would not live long and would require help with every aspect of daily life, from eating to bathing. It was not quite the marriage proposal Ally hoped for.

“My life changed 180 degrees in a matter of 24 hours,” she said. “I had met the love of my life, who I wanted a future with, and learned that there might not be a future. It was breathtaking, in a good way and bad way immediately.”

When she looked up Huntington’s disease online, she had what she called her “come to Jesus moment.”

“I made the spiritual promise to help him or do whatever I could to raise awareness of the disease,” she said.
Better to not know

When Tyler was a teenager growing up in Lancaster, Ohio, one of his aunts was diagnosed with Huntington’s. No one on the Bowersock side of his family had heard of the disease, much less knew that they potentially carried the gene for it.

According to the Mayo Clinic, the disease is inherited through one defective gene that has a 50 percent chance of being passed from a parent to a child. Huntington’s causes neurological breakdowns that result in physical, cognitive and even psychiatric disorders. Some people with Huntington’s experience severe depression and mood swings, complications that occasionally lead to suicide.

Soon, Tyler’s father, Gary, who was in his early 40s, began showing similar symptoms. He had problems with speech and coordination — and even worse, developed anger issues.

“He had a short temper,” Tyler said. “He’d get angry and yell at people. He had outbursts that he couldn’t control.”

His dad retired from an Ohio automobile parts factory in 2002, when Tyler was a student at Dayton. During that time, young and strong, Tyler decided on the live-for-the-moment philosophy.

“My mom told me to live my life and move forward,” he said. “My dad was in denial about what was happening to him. She couldn’t talk to him about it, so she’d talk to me about it. I was young and symptom-free. I decided that if I could stay healthy long enough, you never knew what they could develop and maybe come up with a cure.”

He considered getting tested for the Huntington’s gene when he was 19, but his doctor advised him against the idea. If the young college kid tested positive for the gene, the doctor told him, he might find it difficult to get insurance or even get a job. He was better off not knowing.

Tyler has two brothers, neither of whom have been tested for the gene.

In 2012, Gary Bowersock died from complications of a fall and pneumonia related to Huntington’s. He was 60. Two other aunts and several of Tyler’s cousins have been diagnosed with Huntington’s, including a cousin who later committed suicide.

By the time his father died, Tyler and Ally had married and packed in as much living as possible. They climbed mountains and skied in Colorado, visited Italy and Mexico, and Tyler went hiking in the Grand Canyon. They ran marathons and competed in triathlons together. But they wanted a family.

Even if Tyler carried the defective gene, the couple could have children by undergoing a process in which the defective gene is removed from an embryo before implantation. But the procedure is extremely expensive.

Before they went that route, Tyler decided to get tested.

‘The results are back’

After the Affordable Care Act made it illegal for insurers to deny coverage to people with pre-existing
conditions, Tyler was ready to undergo the blood test and learn his health destiny. However, he did not tell his wife about the test.

“I internalize more stuff,” he said. “She’s more external.”

In other words, he figured she would worry too much about the results, which would take a month to get.

Tyler got tested in August 2012. Four weeks later, the doctor phoned him at work. His tone was serious and flat, hardly chipper, Tyler recalled.

“The results are back,” the doctor said. “Came back negative. Go have your kid.”

Tyler went home to tell Ally. On the drive, the Foo Fighters’ song “Walk” blared from the car stereo:

*I’m learning to walk again

*I believe I’ve waited long enough

*Where do I begin?

“I got goose bumps,” he said. “I finally realized things were good.”

Ally cried at the news. When Tyler told his mother, she said, “How does it feel to start the first day of the rest of your life?”

T.J. was born on April 10, 2014. Because Tyler does not have the gene for Huntington’s disease, T.J. won’t have it, either. Tyler does hope that T.J. inherited the football gene.

Now that life’s glass is full, the Bowersocks are happy to slow down and enjoy it a day a time.

“Life used to be like a 5K race,” Tyler said. “It was potentially a short race, so I had to sprint to the finish. Now, it’s a marathon, so we can pace ourselves.”