

*In the*

**F**amily reunions are all about family history—establishing new memories and remembering what makes your family what it is. For Alan Thicke, the actor/composer/talk-show host best known for his role as Dr. Jason Seaver on the hit 1980s-'90s ABC sitcom “Growing Pains,” that was exactly the case. For him, a family trip to his native Ontario 30 years ago to reconnect with other relatives proved nothing short of a revelation. “That,” he

explains, “is when we learned our oldest son, Brennan, had diabetes.”

### What a difference a day makes

Being on vacation gave Alan and then-wife Gloria Loring—the actress who is Brennan’s mother; she later wrote *Kids, Food & Diabetes* (Contemporary Books, 1989)—plenty of time to spend with their son. “It let us observe him 24/7 and notice his moods, dietary inclinations, and urinary output,” he

# Thicke of Diabetes

TV icon Alan Thicke opens up about raising a son with diabetes



says. “Something was out of whack.” Brennan, then 4, was going to the bathroom a lot, yet he wasn’t eating much and was always thirsty.

During the reunion, Alan and his stepmother chatted about Brennan. “She’s a nurse and told us his symptoms were those of diabetes,” notes the comic actor who also composed TV theme songs for “Diff’rent Strokes,” “Facts of Life,” “Wheel of Fortune,” and 42 other shows. “Those words hit us like a ton of bricks; we worried all day.” Following a sleepless, tear-filled night, Alan and Gloria took Brennan early the next morning to a local hospital, where he was diagnosed with type 1

diabetes. Within hours, the Thickets were on a plane back to Los Angeles. “We went right to Children’s Hospital, where Brennan spent the next eight days getting his blood sugar and insulin levels under control,” Alan recalls.

The first few weeks following the diagnosis were rocky. About a month after his diagnosis, Brennan rebelled;

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**Confusion.**  
**Frustration.** These emotions related to a diabetes diagnosis hit both patient and parent.



he refused to take his shot. “After hours of cajoling and chasing him around the house,” Alan recalls, “I had to pin him to the floor to give him his insulin shot. He was kicking and screaming.” According to Radhika Muzumdar, MD, a diabetes specialist and researcher at The Children’s Hospital at Montefiore in New York City, that likely wouldn’t happen today since insulin-delivery options like insulin pumps now exist. “One of those would have made life a lot easier for all of us,” Alan says.

The incident reduced Alan to tears. But, in that moment, something “clicked” in Brennan. “He recognized he wasn’t being punished by getting a shot,” Alan explains, “and that the shots were hurting me almost as much as they were hurting him. That changed our whole relationship.” Seeing that father and son were going through the diabetes process together, Alan says, helped Brennan accept his condition and his daily injections. “He realized we were a team.”

Raising a child with diabetes also impacted Alan’s parenting strategies. “We coddled him and let him use his diabetes to manipulate situations,” admits Alan. He adds that there are a lot of emotions associated with a diabetes diagnosis that hit patient and parent alike—concern, confusion, frustration, and more. But, Alan also points out that not all the emotions

are bad. “Good things have come as a result of Brennan’s diabetes,” such as making Brennan mature beyond his years. “There’s a psychological effect of living with a disease,” says Alan. “Brennan became aware, perhaps earlier in life than most, of his mortality, so he takes advantage of every moment and lives life to the fullest.”

### Man in motion

Brennan Thicke, now 34, hasn’t let diabetes slow him down. As a teen, he was a voiceover actor on the animated TV shows “Dennis the Menace” and “MASK,” and was twice nominated for a Young Actor Award. Today, he’s a happily married, busy entrepreneur. He’s also the proud dad to son Tyler, born last June. “I was delighted when he made me a grandfather,” beams the 62-year-old Alan.

Years after Brennan’s diagnosis, Alan Thicke’s half-brother Todd (they have the same father) developed diabetes. “There’s probably a genetic link on my father’s side,” says Alan, who also achieved fame with “Thicke of the Night,” his early-’80s attempt to compete on late-night TV against Johnny Carson. So the whole family, including Alan’s two other sons—Grammy-nominated singer/songwriter Robin, 32, and Carter, 11—are alert to the symptoms of diabetes. Tyler hasn’t shown symptoms of hav-


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ing diabetes, but Alan says they “keep a close eye on him.”

Brennan’s diabetes has been controlled for years with the help of an insulin pump and good diet, but that doesn’t stop Alan from worrying. “Thankfully, he was never a frail child; he hasn’t had emergency comas or many visits to the hospital. Even so, he’s my son and I’ll always worry about him.”

Getting control of diabetes, within

their family and for all people, is one of Alan Thicke’s dreams. Another is to play right wing for pro hockey’s Montréal Canadiens. “My window of opportunity to play in the NHL is probably closing,” he jokes. But while he’s waiting for that call from the Canadiens, Alan works tirelessly to raise awareness about diabetes prevention and treatments. “Our family is hopeful that one day there will be a cure.” 

—Gina Roberts-Grey

## No Laughing Matter

**D**espite a humor-based career, Alan Thicke knows heart health is no laughing matter. Alan’s grandfather had angina and his grandmother had a stroke. “Having a family history of heart disease and diabetes means I can’t take anything for granted,” he acknowledges. “We definitely have our share of heart issues.

“I don’t have the discipline for daily trips to the gym and diets,” Alan admits. But in an effort to stave off both heart disease and diabetes, he manages his weight by playing sports he loves just about every day. “I play hockey, tennis, golf, and softball regularly.”

His diet’s pretty simple, too. He has small, healthy meals at breakfast and lunch, and healthful snacks, avoiding junk foods high in fats and sodium. Then he has a “guilt-free” meal in the evening. “It’s not an official diet,” Alan says, “but it works for me.”

Radhika Muzumdar, MD, a diabetes specialist and researcher at The Children’s Hospital at Montefiore in New York City, notes that, since diabetes increases a person’s risk for heart disease, staying active is a good idea. “Getting routine exercise and managing weight,” says Dr. Muzumdar, “significantly cuts the chances of those with diabetes or with a family history of diabetes from developing heart disease.” —G.R.G.

