

A type 1 blogger creates community

Kerri Sparling was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes when she was seven years old. As many as three million Americans have the disease, but Kerri, like most type 1 kids, didn't know anyone else with it until she went to diabetes camp, where she found solace in the company of other kids who knew exactly what she was going through.

"We all shot up together in the morning before breakfast," says Sparling, who is 33, "and it was cool. I felt like I had a community, that I wasn't alone in this."

But after Sparling aged out of the camp, at around 15, she felt alone again. Then came blogs, and Sparling's then-boyfriend, now-husband suggested she should start one.

"It was just to find other people who were dealing with the emotional ups and downs and get the anecdotal stuff. Your doctor says go ahead and take this insulin, but you want to know how do I travel with it? What happens if I take it before working out or having sex? Those things that doctors don't really discuss."

The blog, *SixUntilMe.com* (Subtitle: "Diabetes doesn't define me. But it helps explain me"), launched in May of 2005.

"At first it was my mom and my boyfriend reading," says Sparling. "Then, after a couple weeks, there were these other people reading, two or three a day, and then a dozen a day, and the numbers kept growing and growing."

Today, that audience numbers 85,000 to 90,000 viewers a month, and constitutes a thriving community in comments. Many find her through search—she gets a lot of hits through searches on "Hiding insulin pump in wedding dress" and "Can I have a baby if I have type 1?" (her daugh-

Kerri Sparling

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ter is two-and-a-half)—others through word-of-mouth. While type 2 diabetes may have a higher public profile these days, there's a thriving blogosphere centered around the type 1 community.

Sparling is very funny, down-to-earth and speaks in writerly paragraphs studded with moving anecdotes and insights about the disease and her experiences living with it. It's no wonder she has an audience, or that she's a favorite on the healthcare social media conference circuit. Having type 1 is a full-time job, she says, though she managed to shoehorn in a colorful work history, including stints as a banker, a mechanic, an arbitration officer and an aviation insurance specialist before she could make ends meet through her writing and speaking.

"Professionally, I was always seeking medical insurance, so I had to take the first job that provided adequate pay and full coverage for type 1 diabetes." That's made her all the more grateful for being able to write for a living. "When I was diagnosed, they tell you how compromised your life is going to be. They hand you your mortality when you're like in second grade. It's kind of a heavy thing to wrap your head around. But it makes you not want to spend your day in a windowless room talking to the guy who's just crashed his Cessna into the barn again. There's an appreciation for being able to do what you love."

SixUntilMe caught the attention of *dLife*, which hired Sparling as an editor. These days, in addition to *SixUntilMe*, Sparling blogs for *Animas*, which makes the insulin pump she uses, as part of a sponsorship deal (they don't edit her). Then there's the conferences, where, she jokes, pharma social media types "can't believe they're seeing an actual patient in the wild."

Pharmas, she says, need to look at marketing to patients more as relationship-building and learn to be less scared about patient engagement.

"If they're trying to sell something to the diabetes community, they should actually understand that community," says Sparling, "and be careful with the words you choose and making it seem like [your product] is a great new thing. Know what would be new and great? A cure. Let's all understand that what we have here is just another tool." — *Matthew Arnold*

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