

LIFE



Milly's Pizza in the Pan owner Robert Maleski, left, watches as Billy Zureikat photographs a version of his Tripping Billy pizza made by Maleski at Milly's. They are teaming up to sell Tripping Billy pizza at Milly's in Uptown for a few days in August. **TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS**

The tale of the Tripping Billy

Muscular dystrophy diagnosis fueled home cook's pizza passion

By Maggie Hennessy | Chicago Tribune

Since he was diagnosed with limb girdle muscular dystrophy in March 2021, Billy Zureikat has had to make some adjustments in his Logan Square home kitchen.

He can't let his body move as fast as his mind wants it to if, say, a sauce bubbles over on the stovetop. He no longer stores items on the topmost shelves and uses tongs to retrieve the Diamond Crystal kosher salt box from the cabinet. He keeps his flours in the ground-level Lazy Susan and eases himself onto the floor to gather them before pushing himself back up to standing using his arms.

These acclimations aren't just for daily home cooking. Since last summer Zureikat's kitchen has become a laboratory for his handcrafted pizzas and sandwiches that have graced menus at Pizza Friendly Pizza, Split-Rail, J.P. Graziano's and others.

Across six months of collaborations, Zureikat has raised more than \$9,000 for the Muscular Dystrophy Association, where he is now the Illinois ambassador. The organization helps people and families across the country affected by MD, ALS and over 50 other neurological diseases.

"I love food — it's been my passion for a while," said Zureikat, who is a logistics manager by day. "By following that passion I've parlayed that into something that can help raise awareness for a cause and help me find joy in a time that's been very hard."

It all started eight years ago when Zureikat, then 30, started noticing his legs would give out occasionally while playing recreational sports. Eventually, he started falling without cause more often. After years of fruitless strength training and costly doctor visits without answers, he finally received a diagnosis.

Over time, the muscles in his lower limbs will deteriorate — a condition without treatment, cure or timetable. When he got the call in his car, he pulled over and cried.

"The fact that it hit me so late in life has been the hardest thing," Zureikat said. "To get not just a taste but a full meal of what life was, then suddenly I have these things going on that aren't going to get any better. I took it very hard for a few months."

Unable to turn to sports as a release, he immersed himself in cooking and savory baking. A trip down the Detroit-style pizza rabbit hole led him to hit up Paulie Gee's

owner Derrick Tung for tips through Instagram, and the two struck up a friendship.

Zureikat workshoped and Tung taste tested until Zureikat perfected his Motor City pie — a focaccia-like base with caramelized cheese edges cradles garlicky creamed shishito peppers, mozzarella and cheddar cheeses, sweet corn and pickled jalapeños, plus a whole-roasted shishito garnish on each slice.

Zureikat's pie first appeared during a 2021 Paulie Gee's charity event highlighting home cooks' pizza creations. The pizza sold well enough that Tung suggested they run it as a special all November. Around that same time an unnerving fall while walking his dog pushed Zureikat to finally own his disease.

"A woman saw me fall and did nothing, and it triggered something," he said. "I thought, 'I'm sick of hiding.'"

That evening, he called Tung and asked if they could name his pizza the "Tripping Billy" and donate a few dollars from each slice sold to the Muscular Dystrophy Association. Before he knew it they'd sold 150 pizzas and raised \$3,000. Zureikat did appearances on ESPN radio and WGN-TV, finding his voice as he went.

"Pizza became a way to share my story, to show how food helped me reinvent myself," he said.

The Tripping Billy has since popped up at Pizza Friendly Pizza; Table, Donkey & Stick; and Pizza Fried Chicken Ice Cream. It has assumed breakfast sandwich form at Spinning J and Split Rail, and hoagie guises at J.P. Graziano's and Tempesta Market. More recently, Zureikat teamed with Odious Cellars on a limited-release beer called "Re-Animate," with \$1 from every four-pack going to the MDA.

Next up is a one-day-only barbecue Sunday at Lou's Backyard, 664 W. Lake St., pairing cocktails with superbly smoked meats. From Aug. 18-21, Zureikat will team up with pizza legend-in-the-making Robert Myleski at Milly's Pizza in the Pan in Uptown.

At Moneygun, \$1 of its specialty Monthlygun cocktails sold in August will be donated to Zureikat's cause. Fans can also donate directly to his fundraising campaign and follow him on Instagram for news of future collaborations.

Adjusting to professional restaurant kitchens has been an entirely different story, especially since at first Zureikat made the mistake of wearing his beloved Air Jordan 1s — thankfully sanctioned for daily wear by his doctors.

"When I went to Tempesta Market for the first time, I was Tripping Billy, live in color," Zureikat quipped. He promptly



Billy Zureikat holds a version of his Tripping Billy pizza that's about to go in the oven at Milly's Pizza in the Pan on Aug. 4. Zureikat was diagnosed with limb girdle muscular dystrophy in 2021 and is using his handcrafted pizzas to raise awareness of the disease and also raise money for the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

ordered no-slip Vans.

The process has helped the fiercely independent Zureikat accept his own limitations — whether that means asking for girlfriend Rachael Arnold's arm while scaling a massive curb or staying calm as he navigates a frenzied back-of-house in the midst of service.

"The gift and the curse is I don't look like I have a disability," he said. "It's about getting over that mental hurdle of, 'OK, I need help.'"

The message is resonating as people directly and indirectly affected by MD are reaching out to thank Zureikat for raising awareness about this relatively rare condition. (Per the National Organization for Rare Disorders, muscular dystrophies are estimated to affect 250,000 people in the United States.)

Meanwhile, his passion is seeping further into his everyday life — a shift that wouldn't have been possible without his diagnosis. The Tripping Billy has been on tour all summer, with stops such as Pizza Lobo, Zaza's, George's Deep Dish, and Robert's Pizza & Dough Co.

Zureikat also just signed on to host his own streaming channel on the new cooking-centric social platform Kittch.

"If I didn't have MD, I don't think I would have taken the risk to do the food stuff," he said. "But now I feel I can inspire a lot of people to follow their passions — not just those with this disease."

If you're facing adversity, it's not all over. You can still do good things. You can still have the time of your life."

Maggie Hennessy is a freelance writer.