Twin brothers lose sight within months of each other

Twin brothers who lost their sight within months of each other have spoken of their determination to complete their education and start a career.

Michael and Dan Smith, 20, were living life to the full at university when they noticed their sight failing.

Michael, who had started a medical degree at Barts and The London School of Medicine was diagnosed in November 2009 with Leber’s Optic Neurpathy, an inherited form of sight loss for which there is no cure.

Around 150 people in the UK have the condition which affects men more than women and usually strikes young people in their teens and twenties.

University, was told there was a 60 to 70 per cent chance he would also lose his sight, which he likened to a “dark cloud” hanging over him.

By Easter 2010, he began to struggle to see out of his left eye, and within two weeks his near perfect sight rapidly deteriorated.

Although Michael has been forced to give up studying medicine, he is now studying geography at King’s College London. He also plays for the England Blind Football Squad and hopes to be chosen for this year’s Paralympic Games. Dan is carrying on with his studies as a part-time student at Bristol University and hopes to take up a career in investment banking.

Both brothers, who live in Barnet, North London, are currently preparing for a 570km London to Amsterdam tandem bike ride on April 6 to raise money for Blind in Business, a charity which helps blind and partially sighted people into work.

They will be cycling 140km a day, and will be supported by friends who will be leading from the front and their parents, Steve and Su-Jan, who are going to be driving a support vehicle.

Daniel said: “There were some pretty dark moments when I had to come to terms with being severely visually-impaired. It was hard to come to terms with the fact that I could no longer do everyday activities. Going to the supermarket to buy food just isn’t possible now.

“Coming back to university has been tough but the last thing I wanted to do was sit at home doing nothing. My tutors at Bristol University have been really supportive and the university as a whole has been fantastic in how they’ve catered for such a change. “Blind in Business has supported us in all aspects of my life, which is why we wanted to do something in return. Because it’s a small charity, we can decide where the money is spent so our aim is to raise over £5,000 and enable them to help others who find themselves in a similar position as us.”

Leber’s Optic Neurpathy is the loss of vision as a result of the death of cells in the optic nerve, causing it to stop relaying vital information from the eyes to the brain.

Although it’s a hereditary condition, linked to a number of genes, the brothers have been unable to find any family history going back four generations.

Dan Mitchell, training and fundraising manager at Blind in Business, said: “Having the Smith brothers embark on such a challenging journey to raise money for this small charity shows they always want to work towards bigger challenges.

“They have both been challenged academically and have pushed themselves as visually impaired people, working towards careers in engineering and law. “Blind in Business knows that these young men will challenge what visual impairment means and show how a group of people can work together in aid of a small charity to make a real difference to young visually impaired people.”