

Meet our 2022 Inspiration Award Winners



Each year, the National MS Society recognizes those who are positively affecting MS research and the community with an Inspiration Award. Here are the 2022 winners.



Victoria Reese

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Victoria Reese is cofounder of We Are ILLmatic, a non-profit with a mission to support, educate and unite Black women and women of color who have been diagnosed with MS and improve their health equity.

Immediately after she was diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS in 2012, Reese became involved with the MS movement. As she participated in various fundraising events and became an ambassador for the National MS Society, she realized that there was a profound

void in visibility surrounding Black women and women of color who were living with MS.

Instead of being discouraged by the lack of representation, Reese was motivated to be the change. She sees MS as her superpower, giving her a unique opportunity to unite members of the community, provide them with the resources needed to live their best lives and help them feel less alone. She leveraged her knowledge of social media to create the #WeAreILLmatic movement, which she transformed from a viral social media campaign into a nonprofit organization.

This platform offers access to healthcare provider coordination, financial assistance, wellness programs, mental health resources, transportation assistance, peer events, research opportunities and more.



Terry Briscoe

Terry Briscoe

After he was diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS in 2014, Terry Briscoe turned to the Society for resources and guidance during this uncertain time. Grateful for the support, Briscoe wanted to give back. That's why years later, he offered up one of his greatest gifts: his voice. As a professional voice actor, Briscoe provided all the voiceover work for the Society's Pathways to Cures videos, free of charge.

After his initial engagement, Briscoe also became an avid Society ambassador, sharing his inspiring story with others.

A participant in the Black MS Experience Summit, he shared his unique perspective during the event, helping to enhance visibility in the MS movement and create meaningful connections within the community. Through this work, he has provided invaluable mentorship to those who need it most.

Briscoe's goal is to show that people living with MS are more than their diagnosis. He shares his journey so others don't feel alone and to show that there are ways to overcome any challenges. He believes just because there may be life changes, positive things can come from them.



Salim Chahin, MD, MSCE

Salim Chahin

Salim Chahin, MD, MSCE, is a member of the Gateway Area Board of Trustees, a Healthcare Provider Council Chair and a former National MS Society fellow.

He is the Director of ECHO MS, a program that connects MS specialists with neurologists, rehab professionals, pharmacists and general practitioners across the country. As part of this Society initiative, Chahin was able to expand MS expertise and increase the capacity of neurologists and other healthcare providers to diagnose and provide care to people with MS.

Chahin also co-authored a paper on the outcomes of using the Project ECHO model for MS provider education during a global pandemic and launched an on-demand professional education program for rehabilitation professionals.

Through his dedication to the community, Chahin has contributed to the overall improvement in care available to people with MS. In the future, he would like to expand this work to become even more local — into areas that don't have access to the information that would ensure excellent care for everyone.



Paul Polachek and Douglas Bonds

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Paul Polachek and his partner J.W. Douglas Bonds helped organize the Together for a Cure MS Luncheon in Boca Raton, where they received the 2022 Hope Award. While planning the event, they experienced one challenge after another — from the lead donor forgoing their commitment due to COVID-19 to Paul being diagnosed with cancer. Despite all these challenges, Polachek and Bonds persevered and raised over \$50,000 for the event.

In 2010, Polachek was diagnosed with primary-progressive MS and after facing many obstacles, Bonds reached out to the Society for help. He says the Society was a beacon, connecting them with the critical resources and support they needed to navigate their journey and the information he needed to effectively advocate for his partner.

Over the years, Polachek and Bonds have selflessly given their time and talents through volunteering, fundraising and giving. Bonds says that this is because they realize that he and Polachek are two people out of the nearly 1 million that need assistance. Which is why they consider being ambassadors as one of their most important roles. Anytime they meet someone affected by MS they give out a Society card with a smile, knowing that the Society will be there for them, too.



Tom and Pat Heller

Pat Heller

Shortly after being diagnosed with MS in 2005, Pat Heller and her husband Tom became involved with Challenge Walk MS®: Door County. Throughout the year leading up to the event, Pat fundraises by selling her watercolor paintings, handknit items and greeting cards, both through her website, PatriciaHellerDesigns.com, and at local businesses in northeast Wisconsin. All proceeds go directly to the Society.

When the time comes for Challenge Walk MS, her work doesn't stop with fundraising. She and

Tom recruit a team of family and friends to facilitate a rest stop — providing doughnuts, coffee and a sense of community to those participating.

In 2021, Pat and her team hit the remarkable milestone of surpassing \$500,000 in lifetime fundraising. An achievement that didn't signal an end to her efforts, it has only motivated her to reach higher, setting a new lifetime goal of \$1 million!

A former educator, Pat has always found motivation in inspiring young people to get involved. She now helps them with fundraising and finding their place in the MS community. With her positive energy, adaptable spirit and creativity, Pat is truly making her mark on the MS movement.



Nancy Sicotte, MD

Nancy Sicotte

Nancy Sicotte, MD, current Chair of the Society's National Medical Advisory Committee, led with a calm and measured approach during the COVID-19 crisis — providing guidance, education and support to people living with MS and their healthcare providers.

While the world contended with the pandemic, there were unique challenges for people living with MS. Sicotte was at the forefront, helping the community navigate through misinformation and politicized opinions.

Sicotte helped create straightforward recommendations on COVID-19 vaccines and leveraged her influence to ensure these recommendations were consistent across the globe.

She shared her knowledge via the Society's Ask an MS Expert webinar series, where she outlined precautions to help people with MS remain safe and informed. She shared insights into masking, booster vaccinations and the particular circumstances people who are immunocompromised face. Sicotte's clear direction helped people with MS feel more at ease as COVID-19 became a part of everyday life.

Her impact on the movement extends far beyond COVID-19 guidance. She is dedicated to helping people affected by MS live their lives to the fullest by helping them understand such

a complex diagnosis.

Maura Lipp

Maura Lipp, MD, is a trustee, Walk MS® fundraiser, MS Activist and ambassador extraordinaire. She is a Pulmonary/Critical Care specialist as well as a specialist in Hospice and Palliative Care.



Maura Lipp, MD

In late 2015, Lipp was diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS. Her immediate response was to

find a way to use her experience to help those in her community. She initially connected with the Society by forming a team for Walk MS: Nashville in 2016. Team Lippsmackers grew to 126 members strong that first year and has since raised over \$120,000. She has since gone on to participate in other activities such as volunteering at Bike MS®, participating in advocacy and serving on the board of trustees.

In November 2021 at the age of 47, Lipp was diagnosed with stage 4 endometrial cancer. Since then, she has been trying to live her best life, with gratitude in her heart, continuing to do the things most important to her, which of course includes Walk MS. Chemotherapy prevented her from attending in person, but she and her team still raised \$7,200.

Her tenacity, dedication and generosity have made Lipp a well-respected and admired member of her community — the mayor has even honored her by declaring a day in her name.



Marissa Castro

Marissa Castro

Marissa Castro, diagnosed with MS in 2012, is the I Ride with MS committee chair for Bike MS®: Valero Ride to the River.

During her five-year tenure as the committee chair, Castro has improved the rider experience. She's secured sponsorship for step stools so participants with MS can easily access support and gear vehicles, checks in with each participant, plans virtual and in-person socials and educates rest stop captains about how to best support riders with MS. From securing recumbent bicycles for Bike MS cyclists who are unable to use a traditional bike to helping connect someone to the Society to get the assistance they need; Castro is passionate about making sure no one with MS feels alone.

Castro's Bike MS hashtag is "I ride because I can" and she dedicates her ride each year to a friend with MS who cannot participate. She writes their name on an orange bandana and ties it around her ankle so she can keep them close as she pedals.

Jon Franko and Matthew Porter

In February of 2022, Jon Franko and Matthew Porter ran the “Show Me 100,” 100 miles from the St. Louis area to the Missouri State Capitol to raise funds and awareness for the National MS Society. They raised over \$120,000 and met with legislators to advocate for increased access to prescription drugs and to protect expanded health care coverage for the most vulnerable Missourians.



Jon Franko and Matthew Porter

Diagnosed with MS in 2016, Jon considers himself fortunate because his physical symptoms are minimal. As a result, he is passionate about using his physical abilities to help raise funds and awareness for those who cannot. He’s also passionate about advancing research, which in turn will make a difference in the treatments available for people who are newly diagnosed and improve the quality of care for all those living with MS.

Matthew got involved with the Society shortly after being diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS in 2014. He is focused on working toward a cure and helping people with MS live their best lives. His mantra, “I want to do the extraordinary today in hopes that I can do the ordinary in 20 years,” guides his work. He is driven to create a better today that will in turn,

create a world free of MS.



John Mohler

John Mohler

John Mohler leads the MS Connection group on The Mighty, an online platform sponsored by the Society that provides a safe space to connect for anyone affected by MS. By facilitating this platform, he has touched the lives of countless people navigating their MS journey through shared learning, emotional support and inspiration.

Since being diagnosed with primary progressive MS in 1990, John had to make many adjustments to fulfill his purpose. He is passionate about ensuring no one feels left out or isolated and providing opportunities for people to connect.

John has helped grow The Mighty online community to over 1,400 members this year. He provides weekly content in the form of meaningful blog posts, photos and articles. With topics ranging from advocating for yourself, support for care partners, grief resources and an overview of the ADA there truly is information for anyone affected by MS.

John is also quick to give credit where credit is due, attributing his accomplishments to the support he receives from his wife and care partner, Mary Anne.



John King

John King

John King is CNN's chief national correspondent and anchor of Inside Politics. An award-winning journalist, John has covered the past nine presidential elections and has reported from all 50 states and more than 70 countries. He is pivotal to the network's daily reporting, breaking news coverage and participates in major events such as CNN's 2020 Election Night in America coverage. Past campaign experience includes moderating three presidential primary debates in 2012.

In an unplanned moment during his live show, while making a point about the importance of COVID-19 vaccines and masking to protect those who are immunocompromised, he shared with the world that he had been privately living with MS for 13 years. His honesty brought the unique challenges facing the MS community and others with compromised immune systems into the national conversation.

A short time later, John spoke at the Public Policy Conference to offer advice to MS activists on how to share their stories most effectively to cut through the noise and make an impact with legislators. At the conference, he shared his journey with MS and its effect on his life — offering invaluable visibility and insight into how to make an impact within the MS movement.



Jason DaSilva

Jason Da Silva

Jason DaSilva is a director, producer, writer and disability rights activist best known for his Emmy Award-winning documentary "When I Walk." He was diagnosed with primary progressive MS at age 25 and has since made it his mission to amplify the voices of people with disabilities.

Jason recently released his second documentary "Predicting My MS" in partnership with the

PBS science program NOVA. In this film, he explores potential risk factors in an attempt to determine what may or may not have contributed to his MS and interviews his family members to learn of a possible genetic history of the disease. Through his work, Jason is leveraging his platform to reach new audiences and educate the broader community about MS.

But his work doesn't end with his films. He also developed an app called AXS Map, a crowdsourcing forum that allows people from around the world to rate businesses based on their accessibility. This tool helps people with mobility issues find out which are accessible and to what degree.

Jason's hard work has helped shine a light on life with MS and the obstacles those with disabilities face every day.



Dick Bell

Dick Bell

When Dick Bell began volunteering with the Society, he didn't have a personal connection with MS. He did, however, believe in using his financial savvy and knowledge of the health insurance industry for the greater good.

Since 2007, he has led the Society's Financial Education Partners (FEP) program. The FEP offers one-on-one counseling for people dealing with financial insecurity because of an MS diagnosis.

Whether it's helping someone to cope with the reality that they will have a shortened work life and the implications that has for their health insurance and medical expenses, or how to make their savings last to provide for long-term needs, Dick has been an invaluable resource. He empowers people to get the information they need by not only answering their questions but giving them the right questions to ask.

Dick refers to his work as having a “halo effect” — sharing his expertise helps ensure others are equipped to make the right choices, which, ultimately, makes the world a better place.