

[A Hilton family legacy](#)



Nine questions with Steve Hilton

They're one of America's most famous families. From a hotel dynasty to investments in global philanthropy, the Hilton family is an iconic part of the American landscape.

And with combined giving of more than \$70 million, they are also powering iconic breakthroughs in the multiple sclerosis movement. We sat down with Steve Hilton, chair of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, to learn more about the family's journey with MS and their support of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

What's your MS Connection?

My mom [Marilyn] had MS. I was in my mid-30s when my mom initially had signs of MS. For her it was a gradual decline. When it was really not possible for her to walk and she had to be helped around or in a wheelchair, that was a really tough one, not only for her but obviously for all of us in the family.

What was your mom like?

Growing up, my mom was just the best mom that anybody could hope for — vibrant, high-energy, loving, encouraging. And when I look back, I just have these memories of my mom surrounded by all of my brothers and sisters and our friends.

UCLA's famous basketball coach, John Wooden, said, "Things turn out best for those who make the best of the way things turn out."

I like to use that quote to describe my mom's attitude because she was always so optimistic. In spite of her disability, which got worse over the years, she maintained a very positive

attitude, and all of us in the family just admired that about her.

Can you tell us about the Hilton Foundation and how it got started?

My grandfather, Conrad Hilton, the founder of Hilton Hotels, created the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation in 1944. For many years it was relatively small, but when he died, he left nearly his entire estate to the foundation with the mission mandate to help the most needy, impoverished and vulnerable. His legacy of philanthropy and charitable giving has permeated the Hilton family for generations.

Why does the Hilton family and the Hilton Foundation support the National MS Society?

My mom had multiple sclerosis, so we share the urgency in wanting to find a cure and providing services and support to those living with the disease. But the earliest gift from the Hilton Foundation to the National MS Society was actually in 1957 for \$250.

What impressed you and your family about the Society?

We have a long history of giving to the Society because it is the largest funder of MS research in the world. We have been impressed with the way the Society gathers around industry-leading experts in research and is very critical in evaluating projects to invest in. There is comfort in knowing there is strong oversight and management of our donation and that the money will go where it is needed most.

How did your mom's experience with MS help motivate the Hilton family?

Our family was fortunate in that we could afford nursing care and support to help take care of my mom. But we also recognize that not all families and people affected by the disease are as fortunate. When my mom was diagnosed with MS, it really moved all of us to want to do more to help other individuals and families affected by the disease.

Why do you think people should donate to the National MS Society?

Recent research estimates that nearly 1 million people in the U.S. are living with MS. That's nearly double the previous estimate and a really compelling reason why individuals should be supporting MS research and services for those affected by the disease.

You stress "individuals." Is there a reason why?

The culture of Americans is to want to give — to help. But when people think of giving, they think foundations are the largest piece of that pie. That's simply not true. If you look at giving as a whole, it's not the big foundations that give the most, it's the individuals as a combined group that give far more. I don't think that anybody should ever think their gift isn't going to make a difference. I don't believe that at all.

The Hilton Foundation has funded the Marilyn Hilton MS Achievement Center at UCLA. Can you tell us why that facility is so important to you?

The Marilyn Hilton MS Achievement Center offers wellness opportunities — physical therapy,

yoga, art therapy — which complement medical management of diseases for people living with multiple sclerosis and other neurological illnesses. The purpose of the Center is to empower people living with MS to take control of their health and well-being with the help of educational and experiential programs. In addition to helping improve the lives of those affected by MS in the Los Angeles area, the Center has become a model for other Centers throughout the country. That's where I feel our contribution has touched the most lives.

Web exclusive

Learn more about the [Marylin Hilton MS Achievement Center](#).