

[A weekend walk](#)



A challenge and a celebration to raise awareness about MS

by James Townsend

Walking 50 miles over a three-day weekend might not be some people's idea of a great time. But for the hundreds of participants in the National Multiple Sclerosis Society's Challenge Walk MS, the event to raise funds is a celebration and a family reunion.

Take, for instance, Anne Murphy, who has used a wheelchair for the last eight years, and her brother Paul Keohane. "I'm pretty much of a type-A person," says Murphy, who lives in Tewksbury, Massachusetts. She's not the type to lament her circumstances. She broke her back and neck in a car accident in 1985, but "just nine months later, I was doing aerobics," she recalls. "So, years later when I began limping, I thought it was something to do with the accident and that I just needed a break."

Going virtual

Challenge Walk MS 2020 events have been changed to virtual events because of COVID-19.

To register for any of the events or to donate, visit [challengewalkMS.org](https://www.challengewalkMS.org).

She eventually was diagnosed with primary progressive MS in 2001. "I was busy at the time studying for a master's degree in elementary education and raising my 7- and 9-year-old

kids. Within nine months I had to go on disability.”

Then she and Keohane found out about Challenge Walk MS: Cape Cod. Keohane, of Oxford, Massachusetts, says: “I got involved 18 years ago because someone I worked with at the time mentioned it to me. Anne had been diagnosed with MS a few years prior so I thought doing this event could be a good way for me to show my support and love for her. Anne joined me in my third year, and I got to see first-hand how MS was affecting her. At that point I couldn’t look back. As long as I was able, I was going to continue participating.”

Joining forces

Even though she was unable to walk, Murphy felt deeply that she needed to do something for the cause and to feel like she was doing something to fight back against her MS. “As my mobility was starting to go, I thought, ‘This is a way for me to be mobile’ — with Paul’s help, of course,” Murphy says. “I really didn’t know what to expect or whether I’d be able to do it, but then I learned that there was going to be so much support along the way, so I decided to do it.”

Keohane and Murphy joined forces for 10 years straight with Murphy sitting atop a three-wheeled bike that allowed her to pedal with her arms and Paul pushing the bike from behind over the wooded and varied terrain of the Cape Cod Rail Trail. “The pressure is all on Paul,” Murphy says. “He’s really been dedicated and takes on so much responsibility. He’s quite an athlete and trains for hours every day leading up to this event.”

They found a new three-wheeled all-terrain bike that will work better for Murphy. “It’s so inspiring,” Murphy says. “I love the challenge and being with all these people again that we’ve met over the years, seeing their smiles and talking together in the beautiful sunlight, people who either have MS or know someone who does and who know a lot about the disease. It’s a really positive event with tremendous support — people cheering you on and clapping, providing water, snacks and food and places to rest along the way.”

Inspiring each other

Murphy says that although people remember and are inspired by her and her brother, seeing all the others participating is inspiring to them, as well. “It’s like proof of the old saying, ‘Where there’s a will, there’s a way.’”

Aileen Curran, the national director of Challenge Walk MS, says the Challenge Walk MS event series has raised \$78 million since it began, with participants averaging \$2,200 in donations. The 2019 Challenge Walk MS on Cape Cod brought in \$880,000, and 535 people participated.



Participants at the 2019 Challenge Walk MS on Cape Cod brought in \$880,000, and 535 people participated. Photo courtesy of Anne Murphy

There are three Challenge Walk MS events: in Cape Cod, Massachusetts; in Door County, Wisconsin; and in San Diego, California. The walks have been changed to virtual events because of COVID-19. There is an option to walk 30 miles over two days as well as the full three-day, 50-mile walk. “It’s an endurance walking event that dares us to move beyond our limits, both as individuals and as a group,” Curran says.

“I really love the last day and last hour of the Walk,” Murphy says. “Everyone changes into colored T-shirts — orange for those with MS, and blue for those who don’t have MS. Obviously everyone could see that I had MS, but when you suddenly see all the orange T-shirts and realize that those people did the walk despite their MS, it’s amazing!”

When asked about one of her favorite moments over the last 10 years, without a moment’s hesitation, Murphy recalls the end of the first leg of her first Challenge Walk. “We were like at about mile 18, and I was feeling strong,” she says. “The very last part was pretty much all downhill, so I told Paul and the others, ‘I’m going to go ahead, OK? If I get tired, I’ll stop and wait for you.’ Well, there I was rolling along alone toward the finish line and all the people were cheering, thinking that I had done the whole 20 miles by myself. I was grinning from ear to ear, and I never told anyone the truth!”

James Townsend is a writer in Boulder, Colorado.

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Learn more about [Challenge Walk MS](#).