

Bite club



An apple orchard is the star of a successful MS fundraiser.

by Mike Knight

It was 2004 and Dave Flannery was stumped. For years he'd tried to figure out how to raise money to help people living with multiple sclerosis. Flannery had three very important reasons for wanting to find a cure.

Flannery, now 71 years old, is one of eight siblings—three boys and five girls. In the early 1980s, Flannery's sister Peggy was diagnosed with MS. Then two other sisters, Sheila and Jan, were diagnosed with the disease. Flannery wanted to help.

"I always felt that I owed it to them to try and do what I could to help, to contribute in some small way to solving the MS puzzle and doing what we could to support people living with the disease," Flannery says.



Participants complete a mile-long course through the orchard at Apple Holler Family Farm in Sturtevant, Wisconsin. Each entrant receives a ½ peck bag for picking apples. Photo courtesy of Apple Holler Family Farm And Restaurant

Flannery wanted to try fundraising, but he struggled to see the forest for the trees. And then it dawned on him: The trees were the answer.

Autumn and apples

In 1987, Flannery and his wife, Vicki, bought a dairy farm off Interstate 94 between Milwaukee and Chicago. Besides the standard livestock on the property—cows, pigs and horses—there was an orchard with aging apple trees. Over the ensuing three decades the couple transformed the property into a 78-acre “agri-tainment center” named Apple Holler Family Farm and Restaurant.



After the walk, participants enjoy entertainment and a raffle in the barn. Photo courtesy of Apple Holler Family Farm And Restaurant

The “center” includes a family-style restaurant known for its slow-roasted prime rib, daily fish fry and big breakfasts featuring apple buttermilk pancakes covered with warm baked apples. The center also features a bakery and country store, pedal cart racing and a petting zoo. But the chance to pick apples, peaches and pears from the 30,000 trees in the orchard was, and is, the farm’s main attraction.

So Flannery—along with Sheri Gavin, the business’s marketing manager—decided to hold the first “Apple Holler MS Orchard Walk” to raise money for the cause that was so near and dear to him. It would be held in late August 2004 to take advantage of two key Wisconsin assets: the first breath of fall and the first apples ready to be picked and eaten—in this case, a crisp, tangy McIntosh derivative named “Paula Red.” Entrants would receive a colorful commemorative T-shirt and 1/2 peck bag for picking apples, and then walk a mile-long course through the orchard picking their own apples. Proceeds from the entry fees would go to the National MS Society. Flannery had no idea if it would work.

“I had for several years prior wanted to put something together,” Flannery says. “I didn’t know if an orchard walk would really fly as far as a fundraiser is concerned, but finally we just went ahead and did it.”

A walk and much more

But fly it did. To date, the Apple Holler MS Orchard Walk has raised more than \$110,000. Some 300 people are expected to participate in the 14th annual walk on August 25. And like past events, they’ll find a fun, family-friendly event that’s far more than a walk through the

orchard. After registering, paying a \$25 entry fee and receiving their T-shirts, Gavin says participants gather for an all-you-can-eat pancake breakfast, then, following the national anthem, begin the orchard walk.



Colleen Kalt (center), president of the Society’s Wisconsin area, with Sherri Gavin (left) and Vicki Flannery, who helped organize the 2017 Apple Holler MS Orchard Walk event, which raised more than \$110,000 to date. Photo courtesy of Apple Holler Family Farm And Restaurant

“The best part is if you are not able to do the walk, you can board a tractor-drawn wagon that will take you to the orchard to drop you off and pick you up where you can pick your apples,” Gavin says. “So you can still enjoy the scenery and the orchard by taking a tractor-drawn wagon. Or you can just pick apples out of a bin, as well.” After the walk, participants gather in a recently completed barn for entertainment and children’s activities. Participants can also win flat irons and haircuts, as well as other goods and services from local sponsors and businesses, such as gift certificates to memorabilia from the Green Bay Packers.

A growing community of support

Sydney Clark, a development specialist in the Society’s Wisconsin office, says the apple-picking event is special for a number of reasons.

“What makes this do-it-yourself event special is that [Flannery] and his family are not just running this event, they are using their business to do it,” Clark says. “So not only is it a good ‘friends and family event,’ but they are a really great corporate partner of the Society.” And Clark sees an even wider appeal. “It’s really an introduction to fall, which I think is a really

nice thing for a lot of people,” she says. “Fall is my favorite season. Being able to go out there and see families come. Going out to the farm and picking apples and pumpkins is something I did as a child. And on top of that, it’s raising money for a great cause.”

Flannery says what makes the event special to him is the ever-growing community of people who participate to raise the money needed to end MS. It’s part of the reason he bought the farm in the first place. “I’ve always enjoyed growing things,” he says. “Growing plants and trees as well as animals, having animals as pets and that sort of thing. Growing things is something that I enjoy.”

Mike Knight is a freelance writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. He was diagnosed with MS in 2013.

Learn how to organize your own [DIY MS fundraiser](#).