

WOD MS: Working Out to Raise Awareness



Three years ago, I joined a CrossFit gym as part of my effort to start “caring for the caregiver.” It was long overdue, as I had spent the majority of the decade mostly socially isolated while providing care for my wife, Demetria, who had developed severe symptoms related to primary progressive MS. As years passed, Demetria became categorized as needing maximum assistance with all activities of daily living, and I became her primary caregiver. Providing essentially 24/7 care for someone can be consuming, but I still managed to finish graduate school and start a career in academics during the course of her illness. Demetria and I were even blessed to have a son!

However, balancing the roles of husband, father, professor, and caregiver proved to be very challenging, and I realized that I lost myself underneath life’s demands. Thus, the need to start “caring for the caregiver.”

Ask any long-term caregiver what they would do if they didn’t have to provide care for a loved one, and I guarantee he or she will immediately name a few things. For me, it was travelling to new places and joining a gym. So, I decided to make time for myself and I joined CrossFit South Bend in Indiana. I was hoping to find an outlet for stress and other emotions as well as an avenue to make new friends. Family caregiving can be very isolating, especially when your ability to leave home completely depends upon help from others. It was important for me to find a social outlet and one that was worth the effort it took to leave home. CrossFit

has a reputation of instilling a sense of community and social belonging in its members, and my personal experience has been amazing. My gym provides a very welcoming and supportive environment where members are always positively encouraged to achieve their personal goals. While I've improved my physical fitness, my gym helped me achieve my goals of finding better life balance and mentally strengthening myself to continue my caregiving journey.

After developing comfort with my CrossFit coaches, I told them about my family and invited them to attend our local Walk MS event. I was merely hoping they would wear our orange "Team Deme" t-shirts during classes on the day of Walk MS to help raise awareness. Instead, the coaches took it to another level. They closed the gym to join us at Walk MS and invited me to share my caregiving story with other gym members to encourage them to join Team Deme. Over the past few years, our team size and fundraising efforts have more than doubled! The support my family and I feel around Walk MS has likewise grown through the years.

This year, the spring Walk MS events were different due to COVID-19. Our team was unable to gather and walk, but our community still managed to find a way to be supportive. In CrossFit, "WOD" is an acronym that stands for "workout of the day." Most CrossFit gyms post one workout each day for their members to complete. To replace the in-person walk, we created "WOD MS," a personalized workout designed around Demetria's fight against MS. The workout was 15 minutes long to symbolized Demetria's 15-year battle with MS. The movements challenged balance and leg strength because those were her two most prominent obstacles during the early stages on her disease. There was a short rest in the middle of the workout, but not enough time to fully recover, representing the fatigue Demetria pushes through each day. Not only did WOD MS provide a challenging CrossFit workout, it also allowed participants to get a glimpse into Demetria's everyday struggles with MS.

On the day of WOD MS, we had about 30 participants gather over Zoom. Many others participated later using the [video recording below](#) (which you can do, too!):

As each minute of the workout passed, I thought about another year of Demetria's MS fight, and the increasing fatigue from the workout was a reminder of Demetria's increasing challenges over the years. At the end of the workout, we were all exhausted, but I was really happy. In a time of great uncertainty, my CrossFit community not only managed to stay connected, but created an event to rally support for MS awareness. I am very grateful for everyone's involvement in WOD MS and for reminding me that my family is not alone in this fight.