

Meet Society board member: Bonnie Higgins



Bonnie Higgins, who took part in the MuckFest obstacle run in West Orange, New Jersey, in 2015, likes to hear others' stories at events.

Bonnie Higgins was working long hours as an up-and-coming young executive at Johnson & Johnson when she had her first seizure, diagnosed initially as sleep deprivation. Finally, an MRI revealed she had brain lesions.

For Higgins, multiple sclerosis had the face of her second cousin, who used a wheelchair and had to be carried out the door by strong men anytime she went out. So, when Higgins' own diagnosis came in 1994, she went into denial: "No, that's not what I have. I don't have MS."

The disease stayed in the back of her mind, though. Years later, after she walked by a National Multiple Sclerosis Society office that was looking for volunteers, she started raising funds and speaking at schools on its behalf.

It wasn't until then that Higgins, now one of the Society's national board of directors' vice chairs, truly came face to face with the disease. After schoolchildren bombarded her with questions about her symptoms, she stopped looking in the rearview mirror, embraced her diagnosis and got comfortable talking about her challenges.

"It made me embrace my reality. 'OK, I can deal with this. I can overcome it. I can own it,'" says Higgins of Princeton, New Jersey.

It was the start of endless hours devoted to the Society, a role that earned her a spot in its Volunteer Hall of Fame.

Retirement gave Higgins a chance to dedicate more time to MS. She joined support groups and Facebook communities. As she moved from state to state, she took on leadership roles at local chapters, becoming board chair of the New Jersey Metro Chapter in 2013-15. She participated in Walk MS® every year and in 2000, her team was the number one fundraiser in New Jersey. In 2016, she joined the Society's national board.

As a board member, Higgins enjoys mentoring new leaders, examining best practices and tackling the hands-on work of her various committees and sub-committees.

She mentions a conversation from a research committee she's on, where members ensure the lived MS experience is reflected in research review and funding decisions.

"This is just another reason I am so proud to be a volunteer leader for the Society," Higgins said. "Everyone's voice counts."

Higgins values the connections she makes along the way, whether it's putting a staff member in touch with a potential fellow studying MS in underserved communities, discovering someone with board potential or attending Society events as an ambassador to thank participants for their efforts.

"Hearing the stories of the individuals who are affected by multiple sclerosis brings to life and invigorates our mission to find a cure for this disease so that these moms and dads, sons and daughters and brothers and sisters can get everything out of life that they want and deserve," she says.

That input and her perspective as someone living with MS are always present in her work. Despite the long hours and tough debates her role sometimes requires, Higgins says, she thrives on the passion she sees in others, also set on finding a cure.

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