

Changing course



Michigan couple gets a taste for a new MS fundraiser.

by James Townsend

Back in the 1990s, Scott and Ruth Crichton of Commerce Township, Michigan, learned that Scott's niece had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. "She didn't really need any financial help at the time," Scott says. "But we wanted to do something supportive, so we decided to go after the disease itself." Since then, he says, two more of their friends and relatives have been diagnosed with MS.

So, in 2002, the couple came up with the idea of hosting a fundraiser at a golf course in Commerce Township, about 40 miles north of Detroit—and the Hacker Scramble was born. The name came from Scott's brother-in-law, whose nickname for Scott was "Hacker," a teasing dig about his less-than-sterling abilities on the golf course.

"We had a lot of fun with it," Scott says. "We came up with silly games, like seeing how far you could drive a marshmallow, and trying for a 40-foot putt using a hockey stick, charging \$5 for each try." In addition to charging \$100 to participate in the challenge, the Crichtons incorporated silent auctions and enlisted their company's vendors for sponsorships and prizes. They are partners in Cul-Mac Industries, supplying chemicals to the automotive industry in Detroit.

"Over the years we've learned a lot," Scott says. "We tried all sorts of things in the beginning. For instance, early on we decided everyone would get a door prize, and we got lots donated, like samples from our vendors. But gathering all the items and moving them was a lot of work. We finally realized that people didn't come to get a \$5 gift." Other ideas,

though, like the silent auction, were easier to organize and raised nearly \$2,000 every year.

“Also, at first we tried to invite the world by getting news outlets interested and such, but we never got much traction there,” Scott says. “Turns out it was better to just recruit people with whom we had some affiliation, like co-workers and friends. When people asked us what they could do to help, we told them bring the people you work with. Bring two other people to make a foursome. That was far more effective.

“That first year we raised about \$5,000, and we were thrilled,” Scott says. The amount increased each year, and attendance averaged more than 100 people. “Last year the event raised almost \$30,000, bringing the total over the past 14 years to more than \$250,000.”

A new direction

As successful as the event was, the couple decided to change course in 2017. “When the Hacker Scramble was first conceived, there were only one or two golf charity outings at play. Now there are many more—memorials and charities for one disease or another, and we felt we were having to compete with them,” Scott says. In addition, many of their older regular attendees were not golfing anymore, and the young people who had first been involved were grown and raising families. “Plus, we were constantly worried that we’d be rained out. It never happened, but there were some very close calls,” he adds. “We’re determined to keep it going, but we always said that when we reached that target goal of \$250,000, we wanted to try something different.”

So, this year the couple is planning a November event that will pair small plates of food with wine and beer. “It’s another excuse for people to get together and do something meaningful and fun,” Scott says. “And it’s something universal. Everyone eats and drinks, and now we don’t care what the weather will be.”

Asked if they have any experience in wine and beer tasting, Scott chuckles. “Well, we’re experienced in drinking it.” They expect to host the event at a local brewery or meeting hall, or even at the golf course clubhouse, hiring a local chef or caterer to provide the food and a microbrew expert or sommelier for the pairings.

“We’re sure it will be well-attended,” Scott says. “We expect about 100 people. We have a very loyal core of attendees. Many have been to all 14 events we’ve hosted.”

And what will they call the new event? “Well, for sure it’s going to be the Hacker something ... We haven’t decided yet,” Scott says. “This is really an experiment. If it doesn’t work as well as we hope, we’ll try something different—maybe a chili cook-off or a rib roast. But we love doing this, and we’ve never considered not doing it again.”

James Townsend is a freelance writer in Boulder, Colorado.

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