

Off-road adventures raise spirits, awareness



A four-wheel drive event covers new terrain in raising funds for MS.

by Vicky Uhland

Each July for the last five years, Philippe and Kari LeBrun have packed up their camper, loaded up their Jeep and made the 1,700-mile drive from their home in Florida to Minnesota. It's not an easy trip for Kari, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2002 and now uses a wheelchair full time. But the chance to spend time with fellow off-roaders makes the long journey worthwhile.

The LeBruns are two of the hundreds of four-wheel drive fanatics who participate in Crawl 4 the Cure, a Do It Yourself fundraising event for the National MS Society. The annual three-day family event includes camping, a barbecue and pig roast, kids' activities, a raffle, a silent auction and door prizes. But the main attraction is the off-road events. Few things make Philippe and Kari happier than barreling over boulders, sliding down muddy trails and forging up hills in their Jeep—and seeing their friends doing the same thing.

“The amount of like-minded people doing something for one cause is just amazing,” Philippe says. “We could go a lot of other places to take the Jeep off-road, but we love the heart and generosity of the people who are part of Crawl 4 the Cure.”

Participants drive their own vehicles, and Crawl 4 the Cure organizers guide them in a group along beginner, intermediate or expert trails in the Iron Range Off-Highway Vehicle

Recreation Area in northern Minnesota.

There's also a Ladies' Run that Kari participates in, with driving assistance from Philippe. She loves the experience so much that in the future, she's planning to get a hand-controlled off-road vehicle called a rock crawler buggy, which will allow her to drive the most difficult trails.

Blazing new terrain



In addition to off-road events, the family-oriented fundraiser includes camping, a barbecue and pig roast, kids' activities, a raffle, silent auction and door prizes. Photo by InHouse Media

Crawl 4 the Cure was created by a dozen members of two Minnesota four-wheel drive clubs. About 11 years ago, the group had a discussion about how they could improve the image of off-roaders. "We wanted to show the world that we're not terrible people who just drive around tearing up the land," says group member John Johnson. "We wanted to show that we could do good with our sport and give back to the community."

Even though they'd never done anything like it before, they decided to put on an event to showcase the sport of off-roading and earn money for charity. "We were discussing what organization to support, and everybody kept saying, 'I know someone with MS.' It turned out there was only one person there who didn't know anyone with MS," says Johnson, whose wife, Danette, was diagnosed with primary-progressive MS in 1998.

So the group, which nicknamed itself the Dirty Dozen, approached the Society about putting

on a DIY fundraiser.

“They said they had this really cool hobby and they wanted to raise \$25,000 for us,” says Jody Payne, vice president of special events in the Upper Midwest area. “I barely knew what off-roading was.”

Payne was impressed by the Dirty Dozen’s commitment. “They’re such good, salt-of-the-earth people,” she says. “And they can really run a strong event, with so many creative ways to raise money.”

Ten years of success



The three-day Crawl 4 the Cure attracted 420 attendees in 2014. Photo by InHouse Media

The first Crawl 4 the Cure included about 150 participants and raised \$20,000. The second year, those numbers jumped to 250 people and \$37,000 in proceeds. And this year, on the 10th anniversary, the event boasted 420 attendees and raised \$124,000.

One reason Crawl 4 the Cure is so successful is that the Dirty Dozen divvies up the duties. One person handles registration, one coordinates the kids’ activities, and one manages the event’s marketing and Facebook page. Another runs the raffle, which features a Jeep Wrangler customized for free by local four-wheelers. One person asks off-roading companies to donate merchandise for the auction, and another handles the door prizes. One deals directly with a local grocer who donates all of the food for the event. And another signs up \$250, \$500 and \$1,500 sponsors whose logos are featured on Crawl 4 the Cure T-shirts, posters and banners.

Even with this division of labor, Johnson estimates each team member devotes two to three

hours a week to the event from January through July. “I tell people, you’re going to put in 100 percent, so don’t do it unless you’re going to have fun,” he says. “Basically, we think of it as throwing a party for 400 close friends.”

Crawl 4 the Cure entrants each pay a minimum donation of \$250 per vehicle, but many of them contribute much more. “I talk to so many participants who say, ‘I’ve been looking to give back to something my whole life,’” says Upper Midwest Chapter President Holly Anderson. “They’re just really good people, and they definitely know how to have fun and make a difference.”

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To learn more about DIY fundraising, visit nationalMSSociety.org/DIY.