

Creating community



With support from others, Walk MS can be a powerful experience.

by Marcella Durand

Attend any Walk MS event, and you'll meet dedicated walkers—as well as legions of people who are there to support them. Indeed, during Walk MS, family members, friends, friends of friends, co-workers, acquaintances and people living with MS come together to create a powerful web of connection, supporting, sustaining and celebrating the person with MS at its center.

A time to cheer

Many people with MS are able to tap into a network of support year-round. A single mom of two boys, Amy Vandergrift, who was diagnosed with MS in 2005 at age 33, recalls how her support network sprang into action when she was recently hospitalized. “They all jumped in when I had to stay overnight,” she remembers. “If I hadn’t had them to help with my boys, I don’t know where I would be.”



Amy Vandergrift (center) with two friends and members of her MS WINGMEN team from the 2010 Dayton Walk MS event. Samantha Gardner, who is national director of Walk MS, is on her left, and Beverly Baker is on her right. Vandergrift pledged to dye her hair orange if the team raised more than \$15,000 that year; the team ended up raising over \$16,000. Photo courtesy of Amy Vandergrift

But Vandergrift, a Walk MS chair and team captain in her local community of Dayton, Ohio, points out that her support network, which includes friends, family and connections made during her military service in the Air Force, shows up en masse during Walk MS. That way, they can demonstrate, in person, their commitment to supporting Vandergrift and making a difference in the effort to create a world free of MS. Last year, Vandergrift's team, MS WINGMEN, raised more than \$5,500.

"Walk MS truly is a community coming together to honor those with MS and celebrate the progress we have made throughout the year," says Samantha Gardner, the National MS Society's national director of Walk MS. "The support of family and friends is an important part of this inspirational fundraising event."

In fact, seeing all her family and friends together in one place, and knowing that they all have worked hard to raise funds for research and programs for MS make Walk MS an emotional time for Vandergrift. "They are my top supporters," she says, "and make Walk MS a time to cheer."

Vandergrift is not alone in that feeling. Damon Scott, who lives in Dell Rapids, South Dakota,

recounts how Walk MS “seemed like something that would get my entire family and friends together.” And so Team of the Future Damon XVI was formed—the Roman numeral for 16 representing the age at which Scott was diagnosed in 2012. The public support of the team fortifies Scott. “The team shows me I have a good support system and that if I ever have to talk to someone, I know I have people who will listen,” he says. “It does take a village to get through this disease,” he says, using the popular proverb. “And it’s not just true for Walk MS, but for everything.”

The kind of support

Over and over again, people emphasize that the most valuable support their Walk MS villages offer might be emotional—and even spiritual.

Bernadine Harris’ daughter Khalidah was diagnosed at age 12 in 2011 and spent most of the next year in the hospital. Harris says she, her husband, Wayne, and her daughter were able to get through that difficult time largely thanks to the support they received from others, as well as the invaluable information and assistance they received from the National MS Society. So once Khalidah stabilized, Harris made a decision: “I wanted to give back through Walk MS.”

In 2012, Harris began to build her Walk MS community by reaching out to everyone who assisted the family during Khalidah’s hospitalization. “With the help of my immediate and church family, relatives, neighbors and friends, the circle of support grew and grew,” she says. For Khalidah and her parents, the efforts of what became the Harris Team were inspiring.

“When [we] attended the first Walk MS event and saw a sea of people from our community, I looked at my husband, Wayne, with tears in my eyes and realized that in order to face these challenges, it truly does take a village!” Now, Khalidah participates too. “The very first year she was in a wheelchair,” says Harris, who lives in Dover, Delaware. “But the last couple of years, she has been walking. She has to stop and rest sometimes, but she finishes.”

Harris says her network supports the family outside of Walk MS, too. “The team has been so comforting when it comes to just plain fun activities,” such as cookouts and fish fries in the neighborhood. But it also nourishes the family in a very deep way. “Prayers from our church family have been a sustaining platform from the very beginning of Khalidah’s diagnosis,” she says. “That spiritual support is the glue that definitely held, and even today, holds us together.”



Caroline Bradshaw (right) with her teammate, Lori Thoeny, at the 50-mile Challenge Walk MS in Charleston in 2014.

Bradshaw and her team raised over \$5,000. Photo courtesy of Caroline Bradshaw

Ripples in a lake

Caroline Bradshaw signed up to do a Challenge Walk MS—a multiday, endurance walking event that spans 30 to 50 miles—on her 50th birthday. It was a personal decision to honor her mother, who had been diagnosed with MS in the 1980s. But Bradshaw discovered that many of the people she contacted had their own reasons for supporting her.

“I sent out a letter to a broad coalition—elementary school friends, high school friends, college friends, new friends, work colleagues—and found out that so many of them had connections to MS that I had no idea about,” says the Nashville, Tennessee, resident. The response surprised her: “They were so generous,” she says, noting that her team of two—she walked with a co-worker, Lori Thoeny, whose life had also been touched by MS—raised more than \$5,000 for MS research and support. “It was humbling,” she says.

The experience made Bradshaw realize how large her MS community really was. In a follow-up email, Bradshaw wrote to her supporters: “It is more than the numbers. It is about the friends who were walking together; when the 22-year-old girl with MS sprained her ankle, her friend said, ‘That’s OK, I will push you in a wheelchair the remaining 10 miles.’ And she did, with a smile. It’s about the couples and families who were walking together, about the folks in a wheelchair who couldn’t walk who manned the rest stops.”

She added, “Whatever your motivation [for supporting me]—and MS has unfortunately

affected several of your families so you know firsthand how hard it is—it was incredibly gratifying and buoyed me along the way when I wasn't sure I could make it."

Bradshaw compares her Walk MS community to "ripples in a lake," with circles extending out from the center. "My immediate village is my family, cousins, aunts and uncles—that tight core. The next circle is my immediate neighborhood, then my work, and it just keeps extending outward," she says. "I feel very strongly this web of interconnection is the only way we will be able to do what we need to end MS."

Marcella Durand is a frequent contributor to Momentum.

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