

National MS Society fundraising events go virtual



The pandemic prompted new ways to bike, walk and climb for MS.

by Shara Rutberg

As Leigh Krauss climbed the last of the 1,215 stairs to the 70th floor of 30 Rockefeller Center in New York City during the 2019 Climb to the Top, she was surrounded by more than 50 friends and family members in matching team shirts, cheering, clapping — and huffing and puffing.

Krauss, a physical therapist living with multiple sclerosis, had just completed her sixth Climb, a fundraiser for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. She completed the first one just a few months after her MS diagnosis. Suffering from debilitating quad pain and fatigue, she climbed, hanging onto her father's shoulder for the last 10 flights, barely finishing. For six years in a row, she's fought through symptoms to reach the top of the Rock. Her team has raised over \$300,000.

"Climb to the Top has really changed my life," Krauss says. "It transferred the impetus from, 'Why did this happen to me?' to 'Here's a way I can do the most with the cards I've been dealt.'"

In 2020, she and her husband, Dan, were in their new San Francisco home preparing for their New York trip for her seventh Climb. Then, COVID-19 hit.

But thanks to passion and hard work, Climb to the Top, along with the Society's other [major fundraising events — Walk MS, Challenge Walk MS and Bike MS — went on](#). They just looked a little different.

In normal years, the Society hosts three Climb to the Top events in different cities. On March 7, 2020, in Boston, almost 600 participants ran, jogged and walked, in waves, up the 1,200 steps of 200 Clarendon Tower, raising \$360,000.

When the pandemic halted in-person events, organizers combined the next two Climbs, one in New York and another in San Francisco, into one virtual Coast to Coast Climb on August 15, 2020. Participants could “virtually” climb any of the buildings in the series or complete a trifecta of all three — Boston, New York and San Francisco.

A central online event hub live-streamed an opening ceremony and delivered all kinds of support, from a program to design and print Climb bibs to social media fundraising tools. Participants could climb stairs wherever they liked, inside or out, tracking their progress through the Charity Miles app, which provided a customized virtual experience themed to New York, Boston or San Francisco and the buildings that would have been climbed. People climbed everywhere from the “Rocky Stairs” of the Philadelphia Museum of Art to the stone stairs at Red Rocks Amphitheater in Colorado, says Michele Ludlow, senior director, emerging events for the Society.

The Climb events raised \$1.23 million, just shy of their \$1.3 million original budget. Participants climbed in all 50 states. The virtual platform allowed people who would not have been able to travel to the original host cities to participate, engaging a new audience and generating new revenue.

Virtual Bike MS

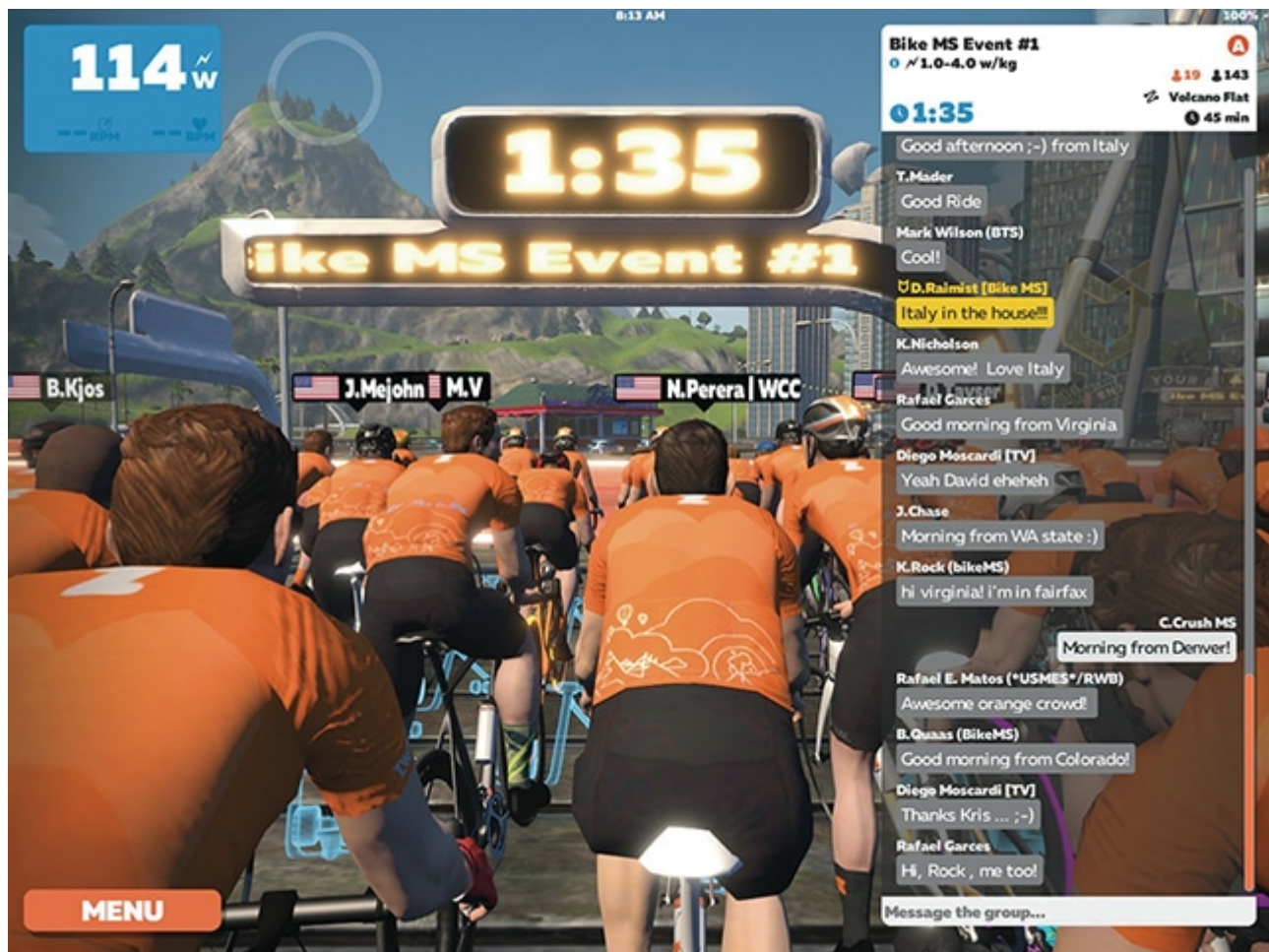
How do you turn pickle juice and PB&Js at rest stops into a virtual experience? That was just a tiny taste of the challenge the Bike MS team faced turning the country's largest bicycle fundraising series into a virtual experience.

“We had to completely reimagine the event,” says Kris Rauh, associate vice president, Bike MS Experience. Instead of dozens of in-person rides in locations across the country, two virtual rides were held in September and October 2020. Bike MS: Inside Out participants chose their own route and tracked outdoor miles through the Strava app and indoor, stationary bike miles through Zwift, or without any technology at all. Participants were flooded with online support throughout the rides, from a live-streamed opening ceremony to virtual rest stops, scavenger hunts with riders posting their finds on social media, fundraising challenges and live voting for the best jersey. Social media posts show Strava route maps everywhere from London to Polynesian islands and photos of cornfields and mountain passes.

“Even though how we ride is different, the why we ride is still the same — people with MS need us more than ever,” says Rauh. “We definitely saw the same spirit, passion and

camaraderie on the day of the virtual event as on past events.”

Even though they had to pack their own pickle juice, Bike MS participants raised over \$8 million.



Chris Wallner virtually races through a cycling training app, Zwift.

For Bike MS veteran Chris Wallner, 37, of Denver, who has completed 25 events across the country, fundraising started slowly after COVID hit.

“There was the fear of the unknown — how to ask for money when you don’t know where people are in life,” he says. “But like the Society says, multiple sclerosis doesn’t stop because of the pandemic, so neither will we.”

Wallner usually hosts a big fundraiser at a brewery, along with email and social media efforts. This year, most things went online, and he tried to find fun, unique ways to raise funds and awareness for those living with MS. He held “Five Dollar Fridays,” asking friends to donate money they would have spent in a bar. He made Bike MS beer glasses and sold hundreds over social media. Wallner, who did his ride as an indoor/outdoor century ride (102.5 miles to be exact), raised even more money this year than he did last year.

“Over 40,000 supporters tuned into the September virtual experience,” says Rauh. “Usually, Bike MS has 60,000–70,000 participants over the whole year, so we’re pretty proud of 40,000 viewers in a single day.”

Walk MS and Challenge Walk MS events

There were 355 Walk MS events slated for 2020. When the pandemic hit, only 13 in-person events had occurred. The program switched to virtual within days.

“It came down to doing the walk where you were — in your neighborhood, in your backyard or your home — and posting on social media,” says Cindy Yomantas, associate vice president, Walk MS Experience.

Fundraising in the early days of the pandemic and amid lockdowns was a big unknown. Society staff debated whether it was appropriate to ask participants to fundraise during a pandemic. Feedback from team captains revealed that “while it’s going to be hard, Walk MS participants are up for the challenge. They told us, ‘That’s what we’re here for,’” Yomantas says.

After receiving that green light, fundraising grew stronger every weekend. New virtual team captains’ meetings attracted 1,500 [participants] and were “gold mines” for sharing fundraising and celebration ideas, Yomantas says. Frequent Facebook Live sessions featuring participants telling their Walk MS stories also inspired walkers.



Katie Hodge (center) raised more than \$3,000 for Walk MS in 2020.

“Community is the core of Walk MS, and these unique virtual ways to gather gave people a chance to feel a bit of the joy of what Walk MS means — to receive a virtual Walk MS hug — and be reinvigorated,” Yomantas says. The 2020 Walk MS campaign raised more than \$24 million.

Katie Hodge, a Challenge Walk MS participant, raised more money than ever in 2020, over \$3,000. “Ninety percent was Facebook. This year, I felt super bad asking for money,” says the 25-year-old, who had been laid off from her job. “It was easier to just share my story with a link that said, ‘Click if you’re willing to donate, or share.’”

Challenge Walk usually occurs over three different weekends in three separate locations, with participants walking 50 miles over three days. One Walk occurred before the pandemic hit. Two became virtual events. Society staff members worked tirelessly to create a digital experience to match the in-person event. After an inspiring virtual opening ceremony, virtual rest stops, social media and virtual bingo, participants attended a moving Saturday night program via Zoom.

Individual walkers did what they could to make their weekends special. Hodge’s mother, Julie Tucker, of Westminister, Massachusetts, went above and beyond. “That weekend is my favorite weekend of the year,” says Hodge, who was diagnosed with MS in 2015 and lives in Leominster, Massachusetts. “Everyone knows what you’re going through. You don’t have to explain yourself.”

As soon as Tucker learned the Walk would be virtual, she got busy. She arranged for nearly 50 (socially distanced) friends and family members to join her and her daughter for the final quarter mile — led by a parade of local police and fire department vehicles along Westminister’s main drag.

Just keep climbing

Krauss felt the same way at the end of her event. Instead of the rowdy crowd that usually surrounds her at the top of the Rock, it was quiet when she reached the top of San Francisco’s 16th Avenue mosaic steps — for the eighth time. Only her husband was waiting for her.

“I still felt my team around me, climbing virtually all over the country in this fight to end MS,” Krauss says. She plans to climb next year, too, regardless of the event format. “I’ll be climbing every year until there’s a cure,” she says.

Shara Rutberg is a writer in Evergreen, Colorado.

Learn about details of these 2021 events: [Bike MS](#), [Walk MS](#), [Challenge Walk MS](#) and [Climb to the Top](#).