

Flight of the Sugar Bees



The Walker family has raised more than \$2 million over 30 years to help take the ‘sting’ out of MS.

by Mike Knight

Tim and Betty Walker sat waiting on a phone call from a neurologist about their daughter, Kelly. High school sweethearts, the couple attended the University of Colorado together, married in 1959, had three children — Tim Jr., Eric and Kelly — and then settled in Lakewood, Colorado, to pursue teaching careers. Tim taught social studies. Betty switched from physical education to English due to her sun allergy.



Kelly Walker (middle) with her family at a Bike MS event.

It was Nov. 7, 1988, “before the advent of all these iPhones and everything,” Betty remembers, so they sat in separate offices at the school where she taught, Tim in the vice

principal's office, Betty in the principal's, waiting for their phones to ring. Just shy of her 23rd birthday, Kelly was in the neurologist's office in Austin, Texas, where she had traveled for a six-week practicum for her degree in exercise and sports science from Colorado State University.

Finally, the phones rang. The neurologist told them Kelly had multiple sclerosis, and that if it were his daughter, she would return home to begin treatment with steroids. Immediately. "That was the first that we heard she might have something called MS," Betty says. "And it just kind of scared the hell out of us."

But Kelly knew about MS, at least in passing, having joined her friend, Marsha Macro, in fundraising events for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, including Bike MS: Colorado, a 150-mile, two-day ride through the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Not long after receiving her diagnosis, Kelly contacted the Society to learn more about the resources it offers for those with the disease — and to find out how she could get involved and help.

She didn't know it at the time, but it was to become her life's work. By 2022, Kelly and her family had raised more than \$2 million in support of the Society's mission to find a cure for MS and received the Society's Philanthropic Family of the Year for their fundraising work. Led and inspired by Kelly and her indefatigable spirit, sense of humor and positivity, the entire family has been involved since the beginning. And though Kelly passed away in 2022 from complications caused by MS, Team Sugar Bee, the bicycle team she helped found with her family and friends in 1993, has no intention of quitting.

The Sugar Bee is in the hive

Born in 1965, Kelly was the youngest child in a happy, close-knit family of five. "I had the best childhood I think anyone could ever have," says Tim Walker Jr. "Of course, I think we all did. My parents are the greatest."

Kelly was "always the sweetest, most energetic, athletic, intelligent, smartest kid around," he says. Kelly's nature and disposition earned her pet names from her family, first "Sweets" from her father, which led Eric, the family "nicknamer," into a variety of sugary derivations. "Sugar Bee" was the one that stuck.

In high school, Kelly earned a school record of nine letter awards, playing varsity volleyball and basketball, and was also on the track team. In 1984, Kelly chose to attend Colorado State University and study exercise and sports science, earning a bachelor's degree in the subject in 1988. She would earn her master's degree in the same subject in 1991; in 2002, Kelly earned a second master's degree in human development and family studies.

Kelly continued running, biking and teaching aerobics after her diagnosis, and rode Bike MS: Colorado with Macro and her husband, Larry, in 1989, '90 and '91. "Then, she kind of challenged her brother," Betty says, referring to Tim Jr. "She said, 'Why don't you guys see if you can ride? You know, if I can do it, certainly you can.' "

Tim Jr. was familiar with Kelly's "challenges" and remembers how, after making the varsity volleyball team as a sophomore — the first year of eligibility — Kelly "told" her father that he would buy her a pair of Adidas Superstars (must-have sneakers of the day) if she made the varsity basketball team. Then she upped the ante, telling her father that if she started on the team, he would quit smoking.

"It took him a little while, but he did quit smoking," Tim Jr. says. "And that's just kind of the effect that she had on people, where she would do something and then say, 'You can do that, too, and this is better for you, and let's get that going.' She was really a motivator from the get-go."

As they frequently did, Kelly's challenge worked, and in 1993, a team consisting of Tim Jr. and his wife, Heidi; Marsha and Larry Macro; Jack Haley (Kelly's boyfriend at the time; the couple married in 1994); and Eric Walker completed its first Bike MS: Colorado. It was named "Team Sugar Bee" in Kelly's honor.

Sweet bees are made of this

From the beginning, Eric says, the team has had a few simple goals for its members, which included not just the Walkers but other families, their friends, classmates and co-workers from across the country. "We've always wanted people to have a good experience on our team and raise as much money as they can but just have a good time," he says. "Enjoy the moment, enjoy doing it and know why they're doing it."



Walker family members at a Bike MS event

A few years after the first ride, one of their children asked Betty if she and Tim Sr. would be interested in hosting a rest stop. After agreeing to host it, the couple began reaching out to relatives to see if they wanted to help, too — no small feat since Tim was one of 13 children. Soon, extended-family members were flying in from California and Idaho along with the couple's friends from high school and college.

"There were 100 volunteers, their friends and people that couldn't ride," Eric says. "Their way of supporting it was to volunteer and do the rest stop or be road marshals and that kind of thing. So, if you were a Walker in the Walker family or anywhere around it, you either rode or you did the rest stop and volunteered for the ride."

Over time, they were asked to host the lunch stop, too, which served some 2,700 riders and volunteers, innovating hand-washing stations with gallon jugs of water, pressboard and dowel rods, buying tables and tents when there weren't any. "And then my brother bought us a trailer," Betty says, in which the couple put tables, chairs, water jugs and other items for each ride.

The elder Walkers made the stops fun, too, decorating porta potties in the team's colors of

black and yellow, promoting the stop via a series of Burma-Shave type signs along the way. So successful were their stops that, “one year, we even had people from all over the United States come and watch us at our rest stops so that they could learn some of the tricks of our trade to make it so successful,” Betty says proudly.

After Kelly was no longer able to ride — she rode Bike MS a few times on a tandem bike — she would serve as a motivational speaker for the team, and according to Betty, would call each of the riders to thank them for participating. When complications from MS made speaking too hard, Kelly created videos to share with them instead. “Some of them were just hysterical,” Betty says. “She was just always so positive and would tell them to get out there and have fun, but to be safe and have a good ride. She was our spark, you know.”

The sweet hereafter

The Walkers have also been involved in other fundraising activities, including Bowl-a-Thon and a wine tasting. “We had a comedy night one year,” Eric says. “One of my sister’s good friends is a stand-up comedian and we did fundraisers for the team” so riders wouldn’t have to pay for their jerseys.

Though she didn’t get the opportunity to meet Kelly, Robyn Moore has known the Walker family since shortly after becoming the president of the Society’s Colorado-Wyoming chapter in 2019. Moore says her connection with the family was immediate. “I fell in love with them,” she says. “They are just genuine, compassionate, down to earth, caring people.”

Moore says the family’s relationship with the Society goes beyond donating and raising money. “They’re ambassadors, meaning they really spread the word and they go out and speak on our behalf, and they do all sorts of things for us that way,” she says.

The team captain for many years, Tim Jr., 62, says despite the challenges of aging and managing the team, including coordinating training rides and keeping members engaged, “we’re going to keep doing Bike MS as long as I can ride, and we’re going to keep Team Sugar Bee rolling.”

Eric says there isn’t any other way. “I think we just keep honoring Kelly’s legacy,” he says. “We ride for her legacy. We ride for those people that are still living and living with MS and fighting MS. We ride for those people.”

Mike Knight is a writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. He was diagnosed with MS in 2013.

Learn about [joining a Bike MS team](#).