

Generosity on aisle 3



At a group of grocery stores in western Washington, multiple sclerosis has been front and center for years.



Haggen employees Pilar Hari and Kaily Hetherton, plus a Pee-wee Herman poster, at a Bike MS event afterparty with an 80s theme.

Soon after Pilar Hari took a job as a cashier at [Haggen Food & Pharmacy](#) in Mount Vernon, Washington, in 2016, she found it offered more than a chance to get out of the house and have contact with adults: it gave her a new cause to champion.

When Hari heard about the store's fundraiser for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, her competitive spirit kicked in and she set out to double the previous year's goal.

"I don't know why, but I felt inspired to send an email companywide stating my goal of raising \$10,000," Hari says. "And we did it."

Kaily Hetherton was still in high school when she started working in the produce department at the Haggen store in Burlington, Washington. She was drawn into the store's community spirit soon after. She made Halloween treat bags for kids, got to know the old men who solved the world's problems over coffee in the store's cafe and organized silent auctions, barbecues and Zumba fundraisers for the Society.

And so, with the passionate commitment of its employees, managers and customers, the small Pacific Northwest grocery store chain has accomplished a feat few have: raising \$1 million for the Society.

A relationship long and strong

The Society has been a favorite charity at Haggen since 2006, when one of its executives asked for support after his wife was diagnosed with MS. The grocery store chain rallied around the couple.

Through the years, like Hetherton and Hari, many employees have gone beyond selling orange paper feet at the register for \$1 to raise funds for the Society. They talk to their customers about the disease, organize fundraisers and, if they're not participating in Walk MS or Bike MS, they help feed those who do. Many barbecues, silent auctions and book sales later, Haggen is among the Society's top fundraisers, a member of its Circle of Distinction.

Most of the funds Haggen raises for the Society come from its generous customers, says Hetherton, now community relations manager of the company and the Haggen Foundation.

"We wouldn't have made that million-dollar mark if it wasn't for our dedicated customers who have supported us over the years," she says. Just as cashiers have pledged their commitment to educate and share resources about MS with Haggen customers, shoppers take the time to ask questions about the disease and show their support through monetary donations.

Haggen's focus on community is demonstrated by its staff, particularly the cashiers, who encounter people affected by MS each day, says Laurie Johnson, president of the Society's Greater Northwest Chapter.

"It's those frontline workers who have been behind this incredible support all along because

of their commitment to the people in their community,” Johnson says. “They are the fundraisers for this effort, and because the people they serve in their lines care about them, they care about us.”

Gathering place

Haggen dates back to the Great Depression, when Ben and Dorothy Haggen and partner Doug Clark pooled \$1,000 to stock the shelves of their first store in Bellingham. Even during scarce times, the owners contributed to their community.

Haggen, which operates 15 stores in western Washington, is well known for more than its sustainable meats, prime produce and made-from-scratch meals.

“We’re more than a grocery store,” Hetherton says. “We’re a community hub.”

Hari, now a community relations assistant manager, still remembers how impressed she was after she moved from California and started shopping at her neighborhood Haggen. People gathered in the aisles to catch up, and employees took the time get to know her.

“When I walked in the store, they would call me by name. ‘Hey, Pilar, how are you?’ ” she recalls. “And I was just floored.”

It’s with that backdrop that customers have been willing to splurge \$5 on a hot dog lunch – sometimes even throw in a \$20 bill – and help fund research for an MS cure.

The pandemic limited fundraisers, but Haggen stores plan to resume events soon, Hetherton says.

The Golden Rule

Through the years, the campaigns for MS have brought into focus the principle of treating others the way you want to be treated, Hetherton says. “We don’t know what anybody else is going through.”

She realized early on in her efforts for MS that the disease can be close to home. After Hetherton posted something about a silent auction on Facebook, a friend reached out to thank her because she had been diagnosed with MS that year.

“As you’re doing these fundraising campaigns in the store,” Hetherton says, “people come up to you and say, ‘My mom, my grandma, my grandpa, my kid, my whoever is impacted by MS,’ and I just became really invested in trying to do whatever I could to put the effort in to help end MS or find treatment options.”

Particularly touching for Hari was the time a customer she’d talked to about the disease returned to the store where she was a cashier with news that shocked her: “Guess what? This is what I’ve just been diagnosed with.”

Thanks to Hagggen's outreach, the woman told Hari, she knew where to turn for resources.

Hari says customers praise the store's efforts to raise awareness, speak of their personal connection to MS and tell her "You bet I'm donating."

"Those are the sparkle moments we hope for," she says.