

# Hitting the snowy trails



## **Fun, friendship and fortitude abound on the MS Snowmobile Tour.**

**By Robert Lerosé**



### **Raven Henderson volunteers with the tour.**

Raven Henderson remembers the time she had to use her cane on the National Multiple Sclerosis Society's MS Snowmobile Tour bus because her multiple sclerosis was upsetting her balance. A fellow passenger helped her down the bus steps and then shared a small pearl of

wisdom: angels up and demons down. It was his way of telling her to lead with her better leg.

“It stuck with me years later, and I always do that when I’m having trouble walking,” Henderson recalls. “That’s what the snowmobile event is about — everyone helps each other. It’s so much family, love and support.”

Over one weekend every January, people living with MS can get on a snowmobile, cruise through winding trails and cut loose in the frosty Wisconsin air on the Society’s MS Snowmobile Tour.

Celebrating its 40th year, the tour was the brainchild of Colleen Kalt, then president of the Society’s Wisconsin chapter, and Warren Fox, a local Polaris snowmobile dealer and ardent MS supporter.

Underscoring the fun and frivolity is the serious goal of raising money for MS research. From its start in 1984, with 29 riders and \$40,477 in donations, to the January 2024 outing, with 150 participants and \$350,000 in donations, the MS Snowmobile Tour has raised more than \$10 million total in lifetime fundraising.

The event, open to all skill levels, kicks off on a Thursday at a hotel when participants get their official T-shirt and hat and are welcomed to the festivities. “One of my favorite parts of the evening is having the rookies get up in front of the group and introduce themselves, where they’re from, their connection to MS and what brought them to the event,” says Joe Holtman, senior manager, emerging events, for the Society.

Riders, who can bring their own snowmobiles or rent, are assigned to groups based on their needs and experience. They hit the trail by 8 a.m. on Friday morning with a leader at the front and a tail gunner at the rear. Groups stop at a designated location for lunch and are expected to be back at the hotel by 5 p.m. Evening events might feature a guest speaker, followed by games and fun contests. Saturday follows a similar routine. Participants can also elect to ride on the MS Snowmobile Tour bus, which parallels the trails.

That’s the usual schedule. In January 2024, however, there was no snow. But that didn’t deter participants, who gathered for an axe-throwing contest, bus tour and bowling despite the lack of the white stuff.

Holtman recalls meeting a tour rookie living with MS who didn’t have much support from his family back home but loved to snowmobile. At the end of the weekend, the rookie texted Holtman to say how much the event meant to him and how he felt better about managing his diagnosis now that he had met others he could talk to. “That was special for me. There are a lot of people who wouldn’t be engaging with the Society if we didn’t have this event,” Holtman says.

### **From grief to grateful**

As dorm life supervisor at Milwaukee Job Corps, Henderson was responsible for more than 15

staff members and 300 students when she was injured on the job and needed back surgery. After falls and numbness in her leg and arm, she was diagnosed with MS in 2010 and stopped working. “I essentially went through the stages of grief. I began to not like myself and not like how I was feeling. I told myself that I had to take charge of my life,” Henderson, 43, says.

In 2015, she signed up for the MS Snowmobile Tour even though she didn’t know anyone. “It was honestly one of the better decisions I made since being diagnosed with MS,” she says. “Most of the people who are there do not have MS and they’re all there raising money for people like me.”

As a tour volunteer, Henderson welcomes guests, supervises the bus groups — and encounters the unexpected, like the time some riders showed up wearing kilts, or being surprised with a cake for her birthday. “I think the MS Snowmobile Tour thrives so well because it’s multilayered and multifaceted,” she says. “It always reminds me to be thankful for life. I’m around people who step outside themselves for others, and that just means so much to me.”

### **Smiles, not miles**

For 63-year-old Marty Iverson, the MS Snowmobile Tour is a true family experience. Iverson’s late mother-in-law, Betty, diagnosed with MS around 1964, was a fun-loving, high-spirited former Army nurse who could take a joke as good as she gave — qualities that Iverson shared. An avid snowmobiler, he and his wife decided to do the Tour in Betty’s honor.

“We took on the adventure and haven’t stopped,” Iverson says, a 30-year tour veteran. His adult daughters, Monica and Morgan, joined the tour as youngsters and still participate.

As a committee co-chair for 20 years, Iverson organizes the lunch stops and works with the local snowmobile clubs to make sure the trails are groomed and in shape for the riders, and stays in touch with state officials to promote the event.



## **150 participants raised \$350,000 in 2024.**

The tour draws riders from across the country, including Florida, Texas and California, with many repeat participants. Iverson remembers taking part in fun activities besides snowmobiling, such as a popular skit at the hotel that satirized safety instructions, as well as a toilet toss, turkey bowling and hammerschlagen — a competition to see who can hammer a nail first into a big stump.

“We’re here to support and maintain our friends and family that have MS. Our tour saying is, ‘It’s not about the miles. It’s about the smiles,’ ” Iverson says — a sentiment Betty would surely appreciate.

### **A mission of hope**

Mark Schmidt, 66, a tour rider for 30 years and co-committee chair for 20, remembers a rider with MS named Tom who needed a seatbelt to hold him on his snowmobile. During an indoor group rest stop, Tom told the others that he would wait for them outside, as he was physically unable to go inside and did not want to burden them.

“We went over, unbuckled him and carried him in. He was a part of us, and he was coming with us. We’re a family,” Schmidt says.

Like Iverson, Schmidt’s involvement with the Society also began with a family connection. His uncle-in-law, Jack, was an avid snowmobiler and had raised money for other causes before asking Schmidt to accompany him on his first MS Snowmobile Tour in 1992. Jack, who needed Schmidt’s help with routine activities and snapping on his helmet, was diagnosed with MS the following summer.

Schmidt and his wife continued the rides after Jack died, before he and Iverson were persuaded by Kalt to take over the operation. They got Kalt to buy a 6-by-12-foot box trailer and took turns lugging it to other events, passing out brochures about the tour and MS. Schmidt also found a way to buy snowmobiles, wrapped them in the colors of the Green Bay Packers and the Badgers football teams, and raffled them at the games to raise awareness.

For Schmidt, it’s the people who make it worthwhile, like the young woman with MS who broke down crying in front of him because she was overcome with emotion at how many people were on the tour to help support people like her. “It’s a ride, but it’s a mission,” he says. “We’re all there for hope. Whether you’re receiving the hope or giving the hope, that’s what it’s about.”

### **Like a family**

If anyone could be said to possess an indomitable spirit, 36-year-old Anita Harr would top the list. At age 4, she lost her arm in a corn auger accident, but it did not stop her from competing in youth wrestling through high school.

In 2014, she was diagnosed with MS after experiencing dizziness, tripping and falling. In 2015, when eye doctors told her to go to the ER because of suspected optic neuritis, she postponed the trip to attend her birthday party first. Between 2020 and 2022, she contracted COVID-19 four times.

“I’m very stubborn. I overcame and came back stronger every time,” Harr says, who works as a patient access representative at an acute care clinic.

Harr already belonged to a snowmobile club when she went on the tour bus for the first time in 2022.

“I thought it would be fun to be involved with other people for a cause.”

Harr enlisted her fiancé’s 16-year-old niece, Baillie, and 21-year-old nephew, Brandon, as rookies for the 2023 tour to help her put on a classic car show to raise money and awareness for the tour. On her first tour, Harr and another rookie were spotlighted on opening night and congratulated for participating in the tour without knowing anyone.

“We do have a bus, so you can at least come and experience the event, even if you don’t have a snowmobile,” Harr says. “Everybody makes you feel welcome. It feels like a small family. Excuse me, a large family.”

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