

Nichole Taylor fights MS her way



A 500-mile walk to give back to the community

by Mike Knight



Nichole Taylor, MD, (left) and her daughter Laura started a Finish MS campaign that involves painting inspirational

messages on rocks and hiding them for others to find. Photo courtesy of Nichole Taylor

It was 2013, and Nichole Taylor, MD, sat in her car outside a Target store while it rained. Rachel, the youngest of Taylor's two daughters, sat next to her. It was supposed to be just a routine trip to the retailer before the two returned home. It was anything but.

Dr. Taylor, an anesthesiologist living and practicing in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, had been diagnosed with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis in 2010 after experiencing loss of function in her left arm and left leg, along with nystagmus, an optical condition that causes vision impairment. Active throughout her life, Dr. Taylor had quickly gone from hiking and chasing after Rachel and her older sister, Laura, to needing first a cane, then a walker and then a scooter just to get around.

After finding the right disease modifying therapy (DMT), Dr. Taylor had spent much of the three years since her diagnosis working to regain her mobility and strength so she could return to being the mother she once was. Those efforts were beginning to pay off.

Dr. Taylor slowly began regaining her mobility.

Four months after she began walking without her cane, Dr. Taylor decided to try the 30- to 50-mile long Challenge Walk MS fundraiser. To her surprise, she finished the entire walk. "I was shocked," Dr. Taylor says.

Now, the pair watched it rain from inside Dr. Taylor's car, sizing up the distance to the store. Then they decided to make a break for it. "We got out of the car, and I started running through the rain with her," Dr. Taylor says. "And I thought I would never do that again. Because for so long, I had slid so far."

A six-year quest

For Dr. Taylor, the quick dash became a rediscovery of a part of herself she feared had been lost forever. "I felt like I was back," says Dr. Taylor. Though she did not know it at the time, it was also the beginning of a six-year-long quest to give back to the MS community.

In May 2019, Dr. Taylor will begin a 500-mile pilgrimage on El Camino de Santiago de Compostela (The Way of St. James) that will take her through the Pyrenees mountains in France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Dr. Taylor hopes to raise \$50,000 through the National Multiple Sclerosis Society's Finish MS, a fundraising program for cause-driven athletes to be used for research that may one day find a cure for the disease. Besides the first day's 15.6-mile, 4,500-foot climb, Dr. Taylor knows she'll face drastic swings in elevation, weather and terrain along with fatigue, tendinitis and other physical challenges. Though many make the trek in 30 days, Dr. Taylor plans to allow an extra five rest days.

Dr. Taylor's Finish MS campaign won't be the first time she's raised money to end MS. "I donated to MS events a year prior to being diagnosed to support a co-worker participating in the Bike MS: Tour to Tanglewood," Dr. Taylor says. After learning she had the disease, Dr. Taylor began taking part in [Bike MS](#), [Walk MS](#) and [Challenge Walk MS](#), as well as [MuckFest MS](#). She's advocated for MS issues in Washington, D.C., on behalf of the Society and she's been a camp doctor for the MS Adventure summer camp for children whose parents have MS.

Inspired by a movie

Dr. Taylor says the idea to hike the Camino de Santiago came to her when she could barely even walk. "I watched a movie from behind my scooter with popcorn one day, and I was just so moved by it," she says. "The Way," a story of a father who travels overseas to collect the remains of his estranged son who died on the trail and then decides to make the pilgrimage himself. Released in 2010, "The Way" starred father and son Martin Sheen and Emilio Estevez.

"I watched the movie and was intrigued by it," Dr. Taylor says, "but I never really thought, 'I'm going to walk that someday' because my function was so limited."

The Camino de Santiago is actually a network of nine main routes leading to Santiago de Compostela and the Catedral de Santiago de Compostela, the home of what is believed to be the tomb of the apostle St. James. Dr. Taylor will be traveling what is known as the French Way. One of the most heavily traveled routes, the French Way winds through the monasteries, mountains and scenic countryside and also passes by the Cruz de Ferro (Iron Cross). Believed to have been erected in the 11th century (the Camino dates back to the 9th century), the Iron Cross is located between Foncebadón and Manjarín, Spain. Though there are several theories regarding the origin of the cross, pilgrims often place stones representing a burden or sin at the base of the cross; some of the stones contain words or messages to a loved one.



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“Facebook/Finish
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those who find the rocks can
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Kindness rocks

In 2015, life coach, freelance writer and activist Megan Murphy created the Kindness Rocks Project, which “encourages people to leave rocks painted with inspiring messages along the path of life.” After Dr. Taylor and her daughters saw examples of the painted rocks, they began painting their own, which Dr. Taylor left on her training walks.

Dr. Taylor’s older daughter, Laura, 14, thought it would “be cool if we could know where they went,” Dr. Taylor says. “And the only place I could think of to do that was Facebook.” Besides painting inspirational messages on the rocks, they wrote “Facebook/Finish MS/Find/Post/Hide Again” on the backs so those who found the rocks could visit the page and identify where they discovered the rock before deciding to keep it or hide it again.

Dr. Taylor’s Facebook page also leads donors to her Finish MS page. A Do It Yourself (DIY) fundraising program of the Society, Finish MS was created for cause-driven athletes like Dr. Taylor to push their own personal and physical limits while working to end MS.

According to the Society’s Christina Carro, senior director, DIY Events and Challenge Walk

MS, DIY events raise nearly \$4 million annually. And the program is growing. Carro says more than 1,500 people participated in more than 100 DIY events in 2018, raising \$5.3 million to fund the mission of the Society. Carro says the DIY program is especially suited for driven supporters such as Dr. Taylor. "It appeals to somebody who just is mission-connected and really wants to try to do something that will make a difference," Carro says.

Dr. Taylor plans to wear a necklace made from stones representing each donor, which she will place at the Cruz de Ferro. "I'm also going to spend time with each of those stones for each donor," she says, "because not everybody can walk it, and I want them to know I'm walking it not just for me, I'm walking for everyone with MS. And I am bringing them with me."

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

Visit [DIY MS](#) to start your own DIY fundraiser.