

Passing the baton



Relay events prove that ordinary individuals can accomplish extraordinary things when they work together.

by **Matt Alderton**

To relax, most people read a book, watch a movie or listen to music. Ashley Kumlien isn't most people. She spends her spare time running—a lot.

“I can't remember a time when I didn't love running,” says Kumlien, 29, a Milwaukee-based personal trainer whose mother, Jill, has been living with multiple sclerosis for more than 33 years.

In 2009, Kumlien, who at that time had already completed three half-marathons, decided to combine her love of running with her passion for travel, while raising money for MS programs and research. So she created a nonprofit organization—MS Run the US—to support a 3,288-mile run from San Francisco to New York. She started running in March 2010 and became the 16th woman to run across America when she finished that September, having raised \$56,000. But to her, that wasn't enough.

“I really wanted to be a significant fundraiser for the cause, and what I learned is: If you want to do significant fundraising, you've got to involve other people.”

And so the idea of a relay was born.

Strength in numbers



Ashley Kumlien’s MS Run the US relay runners and program ambassadors rejoice in New York at the end of the 2013 run. Kumlien is kneeling on the right of her mother, Jill Kumlien, who is seated in a modified wheelchair.

Photo courtesy of Ashley Kumlien

After hearing from many endurance athletes who were interested in joining her event, Kumlien decided to split the route into 18 segments divided among numerous runners, who would each have a fundraising goal of \$10,000.

“They would each run 160 miles over six consecutive days, which is a marathon a day, before handing off the relay baton,” explains Kumlien, who commenced the first MS Run the US relay in Los Angeles in April 2013. By the time they reached New York in September, the relay’s 16 runners—including Kumlien—had raised \$185,000 for the National MS Society.

“Now, it’s an annual event,” says Kumlien, who has 17 runners in this year’s relay, which for the first time includes a series of run/walk 5Ks in major cities along the route. “We’ll eventually max out at three runners per segment, which is about 60 runners a year, but we’ll be able to maximize participation by involving potentially thousands of other runners in these little 5Ks across the country.”

Helping in person

For Don Fraser, the benefits of using a relay format to raise money took a while to crystallize.

In 2007, after graduating college, and inspired by stories of cyclists who had ridden their

bikes across the United States, Fraser convinced his three roommates to join him on a 4,000-mile bike ride from Seattle to Bar Harbor, Maine. They didn't have a schedule or an itinerary—but they did have a cause: MS, a disease that Fraser's mom, Nina, has lived with most of her life.

“We created a Web page that had some information about what we were doing and a little donation button. Then we started passing out the URL,” says Fraser, 30, now a watercraft operations manager at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va. “Together, we raised about \$20,000 for MS programs and research.”



This car, donated to Ashley Kumlien's organization in 2009, has traversed the country as a support vehicle twice—during both Kumlien's solo run and her team relay.

Photo courtesy of Ashley Kumlien

Just as impressive was their work helping people with MS along the way. During their two-month journey, the men frequently rode to people's homes to do volunteer service projects, such as cleaning gutters, repairing broken screen doors and moving heavy objects—or sometimes, just to visit. “We were trying to raise money for MS research to find a cure, but we were also trying to help people who are living with MS right now,” says Fraser, who over the years has watched his mother go from walking to using a cane to using a wheelchair.

“There are a lot of people out there like my mom who need assistance,” he adds.

Because his ride attracted attention from athletes and enthusiasts across the country who wanted to join, Fraser in 2009 founded Bike the US for MS, a nonprofit group that organizes

transcontinental bike rides every summer for 60 to 100 cyclists, each of whom must raise \$1 per mile if they ride more than 1,500 miles, or \$2 per mile if they ride less.

“We realized not everyone could take the entire summer off, so we started incorporating the relay aspect into it. Now, people can join us for a day or a week or half the trip—whatever makes sense for them,” explains Fraser, whose rides continue to mix fundraising with community service—just like his original ride did. So far, Bike the US for MS participants have raised nearly \$1 million and completed more than 50 service projects, which often inspire people to become even more engaged with the cause.

“We’re taking people who previously had no connection to MS and, through this life-changing adventure, turning them into lifelong advocates,” Fraser says. “That’s a huge win.”

The finish line

Even the most ambitious goals—running or biking across the country, for instance, to support MS programs and research—can be achieved when individuals tackle them together. If everyone finishes his or her leg of the course, eventually the baton will cross the finish line, no matter who carries it.

“We are so grateful for this army of passionate fundraisers across the country,” says Rachael Nuwash, director of emerging campaigns for the National MS Society. “They are reaching and connecting with so many individuals. It might be the person they meet while running through a small town, or the person with MS who allows them to stay overnight in their home. Those personal connections not only bring awareness to the cause, but also give people living with MS a sense of hope and community.”

Matt Alderton is a Chicago-based freelance writer and editor.

To learn how you can turn any race or endurance event into a fundraiser, visit finishMS.org.