

Raise a glass



Bourbon tasting benefits MS community.

by Shara Rutberg



Andy Goethe and Teresa Eichner, who lives with MS, created the fundraiser together.

Teresa Eichner was at a backyard Christmas party in 2020 in Jacksonville, Florida, when she asked her long-time pal Andy Goethe if he would help her host a small bourbon tasting at her home as a fundraiser for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. Eichner figured Goethe was a

natural: Each day of National Bourbon Month in September, he had posted an image on Instagram of a different bourbon he was enjoying.

"I figured we would raise a few thousand dollars," Eichner says.

They raised more than \$23,500.

Eichner created the fundraiser as a Do It Yourself Fundraising MS (DIY MS) event. These events are opportunities for people to personalize their commitment to the MS movement, get creative and design an event based on their passion. Events can include anything from garage sales to online gaming, explains Heidi Katz, president of the Society's North Florida area. They can be physical events, like a golf tournament, or "online fundraisers like birthday, memorial and honorary fundraisers that provide a reason to give."

"Every DIY event is successful because it extends our fundraising beyond Society events, helping us move closer to fulfilling our vision of a world free of MS," Katz says. Beyond fundraising, events "build awareness and bring new people into the MS community, which is invaluable."

To help with DIY events, the Society provides tools like digital downloads that can be turned into printed materials and a fundraising app. Learn more at diyMS.org.

Opportunity to use experience

Eichner was no rookie when she conceived the Jax Bourbon Social. Her efforts began shortly after her diagnosis. "One morning in 2016, I woke up and couldn't see out of my left eye. Zero vision," she says.



The Jax Bourbon Social grew from a small event in Eichner's home to an upscale tasting at a local

distillery.

She was admitted to the hospital, and four days later, diagnosed with MS. She was 42. While she was in the hospital, a former colleague, Margee Michaelis, saw her Facebook post about her situation and got in touch. Michaelis had MS and was on the local Society chapter's board. They talked for hours. Michaelis helped Eichner schedule appointments with MS specialists and urged her to get involved with the Society. Coincidentally, Eichner worked at a public relations firm in the 1990s where her boss provided pro bono help to the Society, and Eichner helped with the events.

Eichner led her first team for Walk MS in 2017. "I'm super competitive," she says, "so we went all out." She gathered more than 20 people to walk in grass skirts, leis and Hawaiian shirts, winning the prize for best team tent with their luau theme. The event touched Eichner deeply.

"It was the first time I met people who openly talked about having MS," she says. "I met so many people who not only had MS, but who had had it progress and had suffered with symptoms for years. I said to myself, 'Hey, I'm pretty lucky. I only have two lesions. I caught my disease early. Here are people with 30 and 40 lesions living with MS for 30 years.' "

With her background in PR, marketing and government relations, Eichner knew the Society could be an opportunity for her to use her experience to make a difference and has led a Walk MS team every year. But that was just the beginning. She became a trustee with the North Florida area board and committee chair for all the area's Walk MS events. She joined the Government Relations Advisory Committee and has lobbied in Florida and Washington, D.C. She has also won the North Florida Chapter Volunteer of the Year Award, volunteered for Bike MS and has participated in several research studies.

Eichner's involvement in the Society has been "amazing," Katz says.

"It allows me to channel all the negative energy from my diagnosis and turn it into something positive," Eichner says. "It allows me to fight MS, not just for me but for others like me."

Growing buzz

Eichner met Andy Goethe 15 years ago when she was political director of the Fraternal Order of Police, Lodge 5-30, where he is a member as a police officer of the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office. He immediately jumped at her suggestion of a bourbon-tasting fundraiser. They split up duties: Eichner called a friend who worked with her to create a logo, [the website](#) and printed materials, and she kept things organized while looking for sponsors. Goethe hunted for tasting table hosts and group partners to donate raffle items.



Those who attended the Jax Bourbon Social received goodies like a cigar and bourbon glass.

They wanted the event to be different from other bourbon events held by Florida groups. Plans grew from a small event at Eichner's home to an upscale tasting at a local distillery. Their sponsor and partner list grew. So did their list of auction donations, including a "zookeeper for a day" experience at the local zoo — worth more than \$2,000. They had a DJ, Walter Steele, a fellow member of the North Florida board, who donated his time. They added a donated photo booth from one of Eichner's neighbors, and attendees received a glass etched with the event's logo and cigars donated by Eichner's former boss.

As they worked, Goethe continually raised Eichner's goals for number of participants and fundraising amount. The buzz grew.

At \$100 a ticket, the event sold out to friends, family and friends of friends in a week — even before they went public. Goethe served as auctioneer for the live auction, where the crowd bid for donated bottles of bourbon for nearly \$1,000.

They worked around the pandemic, limiting capacity to ensure safe space for 140 people. "About 15-20 ticket holders asked us to resell tickets for one COVID-related reason or another," Eichner says.

"It was wildly successful," Eichner adds. "And it was a blast."

For weeks after the event, "the phones rang off the hook with people asking for tickets and sponsorship opportunities for next year's tasting," Goethe says. They've already booked a venue for Jax Bourbon Social 2022 — a place twice the size.

When it comes to DIY events, Katz says, "Just do it. Any idea's a good idea. You never know

where it's going to go."

Shara Rutberg is a writer in Evergreen, Colorado.

Learn about [hosting a DIY event](#).