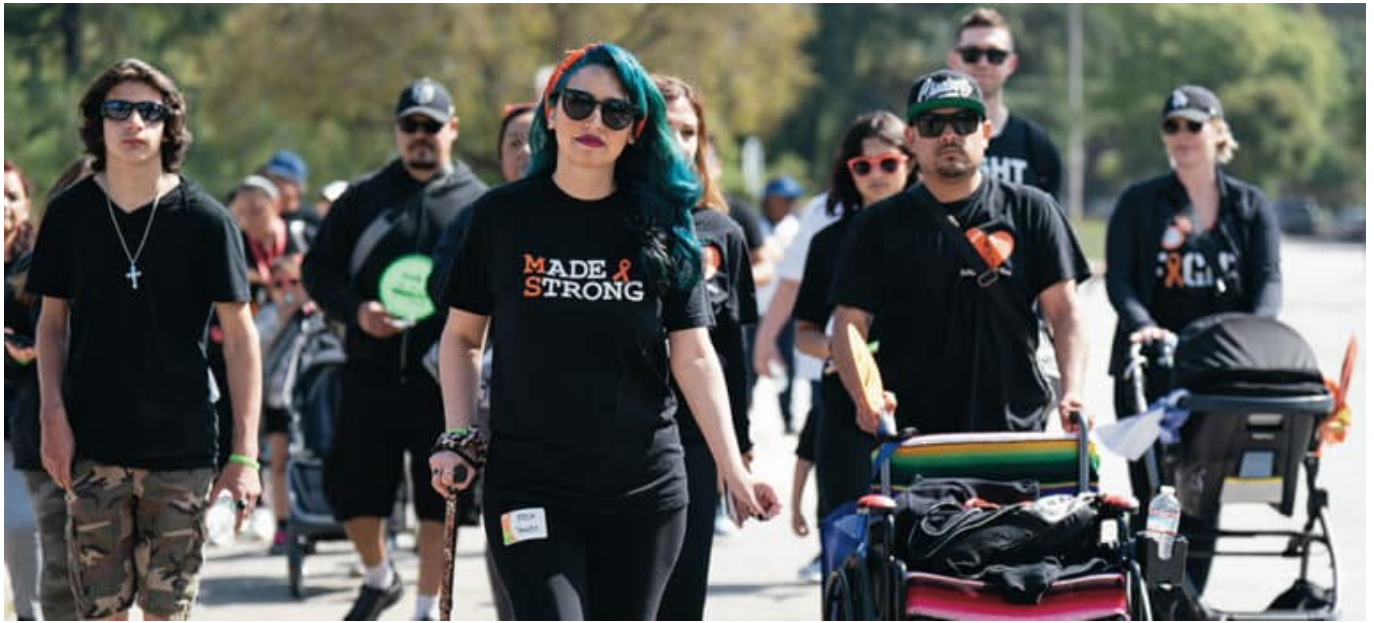


## Showing up to make a difference



### **Walk MS provides circles of support for all involved.**

by James Townsend

Rosa Ynez, 37, participated in her first Walk MS in 2022 in Los Angeles. “It really opened my eyes to a world of support I didn’t know existed,” she says. “I’ll never forget that feeling. It was like a big festival with thousands of people. Very inspiring.”



**Rosa Ynez (front, center) feels the strength of her support system when they join Walk MS together.**

Her experience is a big reason why the National Multiple Sclerosis Society's Walk MS has been such a successful event since 1988, according to Kristin Gibbs, the Society's vice president for Walk MS, who has been overseeing the national Walk MS series for six years. "People living with MS want to do something to move us closer to a cure," Gibbs says. "For a lot of people, Walk MS provides an opportunity to make a difference."

In 1988, there were just 42 Walk MS events raising about \$4 million. Now, in 2024, there are 225 events across the country set to raise \$31 million. Gibbs expects 130,000 participants nationwide for the 2024 Walk MS campaign. Events begin in February 2024 and run through June.

Ynez, who was diagnosed in 2021, says, "I didn't know what to expect when I first participated, but when I saw thousands of people turn out it was a really comforting feeling. You know, we [with MS] live all day long every day in everyone else's world, trying to adapt. For that one day of Walk MS, it feels like everyone lives in our world."



**Darrin Johnson has participated in Walk MS for 13 years.**

Darrin Johnson, 55, who lives in Aurora, Colorado, was diagnosed in 2007. He has taken part in the Denver Walk MS for 13 years. “This year, I was featured on stage with my circle of support — family, friends and business owners who are supporters — and it was a humbling experience to see and know that people are so willing to rally around me for this cause, to drop everything and support me.”

In 2024, the Society is launching a refreshed Walk MS experience. “People with MS are at the center of everything we do,” Gibbs says. “Our new Walk MS experience reinforces that commitment.”

One new component is a gathering place with helpful information for people diagnosed with MS called The Center. Another is Circles of Support. Gibbs explains: “Each person attending Walk MS will receive a hand-held circle. An orange circle means you are living with MS. A green circle means you love someone with MS, and a yellow circle signifies you support the Society’s mission. During the program, participants will be asked to raise their circle so those living with MS can see the incredible love and support that surrounds them.”

Says Johnson: “After I got MS, I went blind in one eye, I could not hear out of one ear, I could not stay awake for more than half an hour at a time, and I couldn’t even really walk very well at all. Fortunately, I got on one of the medicines that began relieving symptoms right away and now I walk fine. So now I am passionate about these walks and fundraising for others.”

Anuska Ullal, 42, was diagnosed in 2008, and now lives in Carlsbad, California. She participated in her first Walk MS in Denver, where she used to live. “I didn’t know what to expect and was just blown away how many people were there,” she recalls. “It was a little

scary because I saw people who were at all stages of MS — those who were walking OK, those in wheelchairs and so on. My own symptoms are mostly internal. I get flareups of tingling and numbness, some cognitive issues and moments when I lose some motor skills, but I'm doing pretty well." When she moved to her new hometown, her enthusiasm continued and she created a new team she named Team Tortuga.

"I have to say that these Walks are so important in creating community and sustaining those of us who have MS," Ullal says. "The energy you feel there is something that can bring you back when you're having a bad day. It seems that everyone knows someone with MS, and it is so moving and humbling to see them come out to support their loved ones and friends."

**James Townsend is a writer in Boulder, Colorado.**

Learn more at [Walk MS](#).