

Slam dunk



A son honors his mother with a sports spectacle for MS.

by Robert Leroose

On May 4, 2019, the Palisades High School gymnasium in Los Angeles echoed with the squeak of sneakers and the thump of basketballs. But instead of opposing teams battling each other, the participants were raising awareness and funds for multiple sclerosis.



Blake Arnet (center) with two lucky

winners at Dunk MS 2019. Photo courtesy of Blake Arnet

For the second consecutive year, the world's top professional basketball dunkers thrilled the crowd as part of Dunk MS, a DIY fundraising event to benefit youth basketball and MS research at the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, UCLA Health and Cedars-Sinai. The fundraiser was created by former UCLA men's basketball player Blake Arnet.

DIY events let people unleash their imagination to dream up and run captivating activities of their own to raise money for MS. "There's a whole gamut of DIY events that people come up with, but this event was truly unique to witness from its beginning stages to its implementation," says Katie LoBianco, Senior Manager of Leadership Events for the Society. "Blake showed that anyone can execute a great DIY event, but his passion and commitment took it to another level."

Arnet was a preferred walk-on at UCLA, earning a scholarship in his junior year. Three years earlier, in 2007, his mother, Brigitte, was diagnosed with MS. She died in July 2009. After graduating with a degree in sociology, Arnet pursued marketing and entrepreneurial positions, but his mother's loss affected him deeply. His family had participated in Walk MS and Bike MS events, but he wanted to do more.

"In 2017, I thought: Why don't I create my own event where we can raise as much money as possible, where we can utilize my skills, my network and create a big annual event? That fueled me to have this new life passion, this new mission to find a cure for MS," Arnet says.

A dunk or slam dunk — where a player leaps in a gravity-defying move, positions the ball above the rim and hurls it through the net — seemed like a natural and exciting spectacle around which to build the event. Reaching out to the close-knit basketball community, Arnet enlisted celebrated athletes such as fellow UCLA alumnus Jon Clark, former Harlem Globetrotter Chris Staples, rising dunking star Elijah Bonds and Kentucky's 5-foot-10 basketball guard Guy Oliver to display their jaw-dropping talents.

"At first, I looked at it as just another event, but man — the kids, the energy, it was amazing," Staples said in an interview with television station KTLA in Los Angeles. "To see that and to see them enjoy themselves is something I never take for granted."

Rising to new heights

At the May 2019 event, more than 70 kids took part in the morning basketball clinic, followed by a silent auction and free tacos, before the pros performed in front of more than 300 spectators. "We added a new challenge where we had the pro dunkers test their vertical leaps, so the crowd could see how high they could jump," Arnet says. Guy Oliver soared 49 inches and hit his head on the rim. "[This] is unheard of. It got picked up on SportsCenter's Instagram account and he blew up on social media," Arnet says. "We got over 5 million views

on our dunks.” The 2018 and 2019 events raised a combined \$80,000 — and raised awareness as well, particularly after Arnet spoke to the crowd about his mom.

“Blake and the organization are an extension of family. It enlightened us and exposed us to what MS is,” says Brandi Morgan, whose 13-year-old son had been coached by Arnet. Before Dunk MS, Morgan knew no one who had MS.

Morgan noticed that her kids became more aware of how other people might walk differently and would ask her whether they had MS. “It was an eye-opener and gave them a passion and understanding of what people go through,” she says.



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Dunk MS **Dunk MS is in its second consecutive year, and has raised a combined \$80,000.** Photo courtesy of Blake Arnet



Dunk MS **A dunk or slam dunk is when a player leaps in a gravity-defying move, positions the ball above the rim and hurls it through the net.** Photo courtesy of Blake Arnet

The thing that stood out for Morgan though was how the dunkers handled themselves when they missed shots. “They didn’t give up. They got back up and did it again. I think the kids saw their tenacity and how they kept trying. I know it’s a serious thing, but from what I’ve learned, there is life after MS. It affects everybody differently and it’s real, but you can still live,” she says.

Luciana Brafman-Bienstock, who helped Arnet with corporate sponsorships, saw how community action made an impression on her 13-year-old son Max. “For him, he could see that if everyone can do a little bit, you end up with a lot and you can help make change. If you’re passionate about something like Blake is, you can get amazing support from people.”

Dunk MS continues to grow. It will feature six professional dunkers in 2020. Arnet plans to bring Dunk MS to other cities and countries as an annual event. “My mom was my best friend. I didn’t get to say good-bye to her. It was so sudden the night we lost her,” he says. “That drives me every single day, to have a legacy for her, to help people and provide hope for everyone who has the disease now.”

Robert Leroose is a Long Island, New York-based writer.

Learn how to host your own DIY event at [DIY MS](#).

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