

## Snow buddies



**Wisconsin's annual MS Snowmobile Tour isn't just a fundraiser. It's a friend-raiser, too.**

by Mike Knight



**Michelle Stroud (right) persuaded Trinina Anderson to join her at the 2016 MS Snowmobile Tour, and now the two friends attend every year.** Photo courtesy of Michelle Stroud

It was January 2016, the heart of Wisconsin's deep-freeze winter, and the day before the annual two-day MS Snowmobile Tour through northern Wisconsin's scenic forests and plains.

Hoping to get some practice in before the tour began, friends Trinina Anderson and Michelle Stroud arrived a day early. It was Stroud's third tour, Anderson's first.

They'd met in 2008 as coworkers at a petroleum company near San Antonio, Texas, quickly becoming friends. "It was almost like we'd known each other in another life," Stroud remembers. In 2010, Anderson quietly shared with Stroud that she had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1998. To show her support, Stroud joined Anderson at MS fundraising events, and soon the pair was taking on bigger challenges: first, Walk MS: San Antonio; then Bike MS: Ride to the River, a two-day, 150-mile ride.

But a snowmobile tour? That was different.

For starters, Anderson and Stroud had both fled northern cities for San Antonio's warmer weather. Anderson later relocated to central Florida for even more heat. In 2015, Stroud told Anderson about riding in the tour's subzero temperatures. Anderson, who grew up in a military family and once lived in Germany, was familiar with snow. "Going across it on a snowmobile never crossed my mind," she says.

### **Getting started**

Stroud, who had participated in two previous tours on her own, gently cajoled Anderson into coming, recounting the thrill of snowmobiling and the great new friends she'd made at the tour. Anderson did her homework, learning about the cold weather gear she would need and watching YouTube snowmobiling videos so she'd know what to expect when the time came.

But it wasn't supposed to be like this.

From her snowmobile, Stroud watched as her friend made her first, tentative practice run, slowly descending a hill then mistakenly accelerating through a curve before sliding her snowmobile into a tree, a ball of arms and legs launching a plume of powder as she flew into the snow. Stroud stopped her machine, jumping off to find Anderson shaken and stirred—but uninjured. Her snowmobile was still functional, but Anderson wasn't having it. "I told Michelle, 'I cannot do this, and I do not want to do this anymore,'" Anderson says.

### **Doubling up**

And then Anderson found out what Stroud had been talking about.

After word of her mishap spread, Donnie Rowe, a team captain and longtime volunteer, turned up on a two-seater snowmobile. "He surprises me and tells me he was able to get a 'two-up' and that he would be honored for me to ride with him, so I could still enjoy being out there with Michelle," Anderson says. "For the past two years, that's what I've been doing. I've been riding on a two-up, and Donnie has been my partner."



### **People come from Texas and around the Midwest to ride during the annual MS Snowmobile Tour in Wisconsin.**

“The guys on the snowmobile tour? There’s no words for them,” Stroud says. “Even though they don’t really know who you are, while you’re there you’re family. It’s just awesome.”

Anderson and Stroud are part of what Colleen Kalt calls “the Texas contingency,” a group of riders from Texas who join more than 150 other riders from around the Midwest for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society-Wisconsin area’s fundraising event.

Kalt has been a part of the tour since it began in 1984, first as a staff coordinator and now, area president. She wasn’t surprised by the mishap gone right. “The camaraderie is what makes the event so special to the people who ride in it,” she says.

Kalt has helped expand the event from 32 riders the first year to more than 150 each year. In the tour’s inaugural year, it raised \$30,000. It raised more than \$325,000 in 2018.

The tour’s basics, Kalt says, remain much the same. For starters, it’s made possible largely by volunteers like Rowe and others from the Association of Wisconsin Snowmobile Clubs who configure and maintain trails, donate, fix and serve the lunches, and generally watch over participants during the weekend.

### **A fun ride, a great cause**

The MS Snowmobile Tour is an all-inclusive, fully supported event led by volunteer guides with a “tail-gunner” following behind in case anyone needs help. Lodging, breakfast and dinner are provided to each participant, as are trailside lunches at restaurants and Wisconsin’s famous taverns (more community “living rooms” than bars, says Kalt) on Friday and Saturday. To be eligible, riders must pay an entry fee, must raise a minimum of \$650 and be at least 12 years old. All tour participants ride in groups, each designated by a color (e.g., orange, blue, red). Each participant is responsible for bringing or renting their own snowmobile. Depending upon conditions, some riders may get in 150–200 miles of

snowmobiling through deep forests and quiet communities each day.

Participants gather on Thursday night before the tour begins to review the trails, get to know one another, sing karaoke, perform skits and to learn about what Kalt calls “a sort of scavenger hunt,” the winners of which receive coveted prizes at Saturday evening’s closing banquet. The event’s top fundraiser—who, according to Kalt, typically raises over \$50,000—is also announced.

Like Stroud, Kalt says the tour is a family event, one she’s watched grow through multiple generations. “We raise money, and we raise awareness,” she says. “But we also give families an opportunity to be engaged with their kids in a really great activity and to let their kids see what volunteering is like and how they can become involved in it even starting at 12 years old. That makes a big difference. That’s what’s cool about this event.”

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

The 2019 MS Snowmobile Tour is scheduled for January 24–26, 2019, at Lake of the Torches Resort Casino in Lac Du Flambeau, Wisconsin. To enter, make a donation or find out more, visit [MS Snowmobile Tour 2019](#) or contact program coordinator Joe Holtman at (262) 369-4407.