

Taking the field



High-spirited high schoolers host a no-holds-barred fundraiser for MS.

by Robert Lerosé

The battle lines were drawn early on the playgrounds of Forest Trail Elementary School in Austin, Texas. Batman, Wonder Woman and their allies huddled on one side. A determined squad decked out in camo gear prepared to fight nearby, while figures in bold neon colors got ready to streak through the gathering crowd.



Mya Duffy created the Field Day Fundraiser in honor of her brother, who had MS and died when he was 20 years old.

The scene that unfolded in April 2022 might sound like an epic fight for the universe straight out of a summer action movie, but the players were raising money for multiple sclerosis in a DIY fundraising event for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

DIY events give people the opportunity to channel their hobbies, passions or favorite interests into imaginative fundraising activities. The Society helps them think through their event, giving them web-based tools, and making staff members available by email and phone to brainstorm.

“I’m really here as their support system as they run with their fundraising idea,” says Katie Million, senior manager of emerging events with the Society. “A lot of people may not realize that DIY events are available 365 days a year at the Society. You can take something you really enjoy doing and make a difference.”

The Austin activity was conceived and spearheaded by 16-year-old Mya Duffy, a sophomore at Westlake High School. Duffy’s older brother, Sam, was diagnosed with MS when he was 16. “We were six years apart, but we were pretty close. We would always wrestle, shoot Nerf guns, build with Legos and play video games,” Duffy says. Sam lived with MS for four years before passing away in 2020.



For a \$5 entry fee, people could throw pies at each other’s faces, among other activities.

Although she admired the Bike MS events her parents participated in, Duffy wanted to create something that would have greater appeal to kids her age. More personally, she wanted to honor Sam’s athleticism and fun-loving spirit. The result was the first annual Field Day Fundraiser, a three-hour series of fierce but good-natured contests with freshmen and sophomores.

The games are afoot

Six teams of eight squared off against each other in versions of tug of war, basketball knockout, a variation of volleyball called Nuke 'Em that allows catching and spiking the ball, and Gaga Ball — a form of dodgeball in an octagonal pit where contestants try to knock their opponents out by hitting their feet with a ball. The activities might sound innocent, but once the games commenced, the adrenaline rush and competitive urge kicked in, making for spirited competition.

Duffy asked each team to come up with a theme and dress in appropriate costumes — a request they took to heart.

“Everyone was a lot more passionate than I was expecting,” Duffy says. “They had their own groups rooting for them. Getting into their teams and their themes made me really happy and was more than I could have hoped for.”

The competition and support among team members led to the day’s most intense moment in the two-member wheelbarrow race, where one partner scurries along the ground with their hands while being held aloft at their ankles by their partner.



About 150 people took part in the fundraiser, raising roughly \$1,000.

The race between Team Arrest MS (costumed in blue law enforcement and caped crusader outfits) and Team Multiple Chaparral (named after the Westlake High School mascot) was a photo finish — literally. After checking photos at the finish line and seeing that it was too close to call, the teams ran a second race in a nail-biting tiebreaker. Perhaps apt given the location, Team Multiple Chaparral was the victor.

Giving back through fun

Devyn Banczak, a 15-year-old member of Team Arrest MS, was blown away by how invested her classmates were in Field Day. The mother of one of her best friends has MS, so the chance to do something meaningful was important to her.

“The main drive for me was wanting to be part of something bigger,” Banczak says. “The

idea of a bunch of sophomores in high school coming together to form something as big as a cure for a disease was something worth participating in, something worth going all in on.”

To get more people involved, Duffy designed Field Day in two parts. While the high school teams competed against each other, anyone else could have fun at a series of booths on the school grounds. For a \$5 entry fee, people could throw pies at each other’s faces, have their picture taken with props, play ring toss or get their face painted.

About 150 people took part in the activities and visited the booths. Duffy expects to be able to donate about \$1,000 to the Society. “I was feeling really grateful for all the help I had and for this cause. It was amazing.”

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