

The man behind the meme



Bike MS cyclist raises more than \$30,000 after asking the internet for donations.

by Laura Pemberton

You might know him as ‘The Blinking White Guy’, but Drew Scanlon—as he’s known in real life—is using his hilarious meme to raise serious funds and awareness to benefit people affected by multiple sclerosis.

After taking to Twitter to reveal himself as the man behind the meme and ask the internet for donations, Scanlon raised more than \$30,000 in 10 days. His story went as viral as his meme and was shared on major news outlets including the Washington Post, NPR and Time.

We sat down with the San Francisco-based online celebrity (actually, we called him on our office landline phone. Very ‘90s of us.) to learn why creating a world free of MS matters to him and how he feels about the viral reaction he’s gotten.

Q. First, how did the meme get started?

Scanlan: This is kind of the second wave of this. It first got popular in 2017. It wasn’t an experience I was totally unused to. I worked for a video game company called Giant Bomb. We would do a lot of videos as part of site content, and our audience would quite often make GIFs of us.

One of those GIFs jumped species out of our own little video game community to the internet at large. I attribute it to internet chaos theory. It just kind of snowballed.

Q. What made you want to reveal yourself as ‘The Blinking White Guy?’

Scanlan: I hadn’t tried to hide the fact it’s me, but I typically don’t use it myself. It feels uncool—like if a rock band was wearing their own T-shirt. But I thought I could make an exception if I could leverage it for a good cause. The MS cause is one that’s very close to me.

What is a meme?

A humorous image, video, piece of text that is copied (often with slight variations) and spread rapidly by Internet users.

Q. Why is the mission of the National MS Society important to you?

Scanlan: Two friends of mine have MS—Chelsea and Katie. Katie’s mom, Ellie, also lives with MS. Her family’s been doing Bike MS for more than 30 years, and Katie brought her team out here to the West Coast, and we’ve been riding as friends for four years.

Q. What do you like about Bike MS?

Scanlan: It’s just a fun event. I think that comes from a lot of things. The fact that I’m there with my friends really helps. It’s also just well designed. There are plenty of rest stops with food and bathrooms. [Riding] 86 miles is a challenge, but it’s a fun challenge because you’ve got support.

The general attitude is also great. Everyone’s really positive. I like the vibe that everyone has. These rides are really fun, and I think people should get out there and try them even if they seem intimidating. I can’t recommend this one specifically (Bike MS: Waves to Wine) enough. I look forward to it every year!

Q. What kind of reaction have you gotten?

Scanlan: I think MS is something that people have heard of, but they don’t hear about very often. I’m so glad that the tweet and meme have taken off and are associated with MS now.



Katie Bernstein and the rest of her family form Team “Big EL” (named after her mom Ellie). Since 2016, Bernstein has joined her West Coast friends to ride from San Francisco to Sonoma to raise money to fight MS as part of “The Big EL West.” Photo courtesy of Brian Tanaka

I think someone in Scandinavia donated. And I’ve had several people say, ‘thank you for what you’re doing,’ or, ‘I know someone living with MS.’ If I had gotten even one of those messages or one donation, this would have been a success.

Q. How do you feel about your story going viral and the impact you’ve made?

Scanlan: It makes me feel really proud to be able to do this. It’s given me a little more confidence in the goodness of people. This money has come in large part from random people on the internet. They didn’t have to give money, but they’re choosing to do that. That’s really heartening.

Laura Pemberton is director of content for the National MS Society. She lives in Birmingham, Alabama.

To donate, visit bikingwhiteguy.com.

To find a Bike MS event near you, visit bikeMS.org.