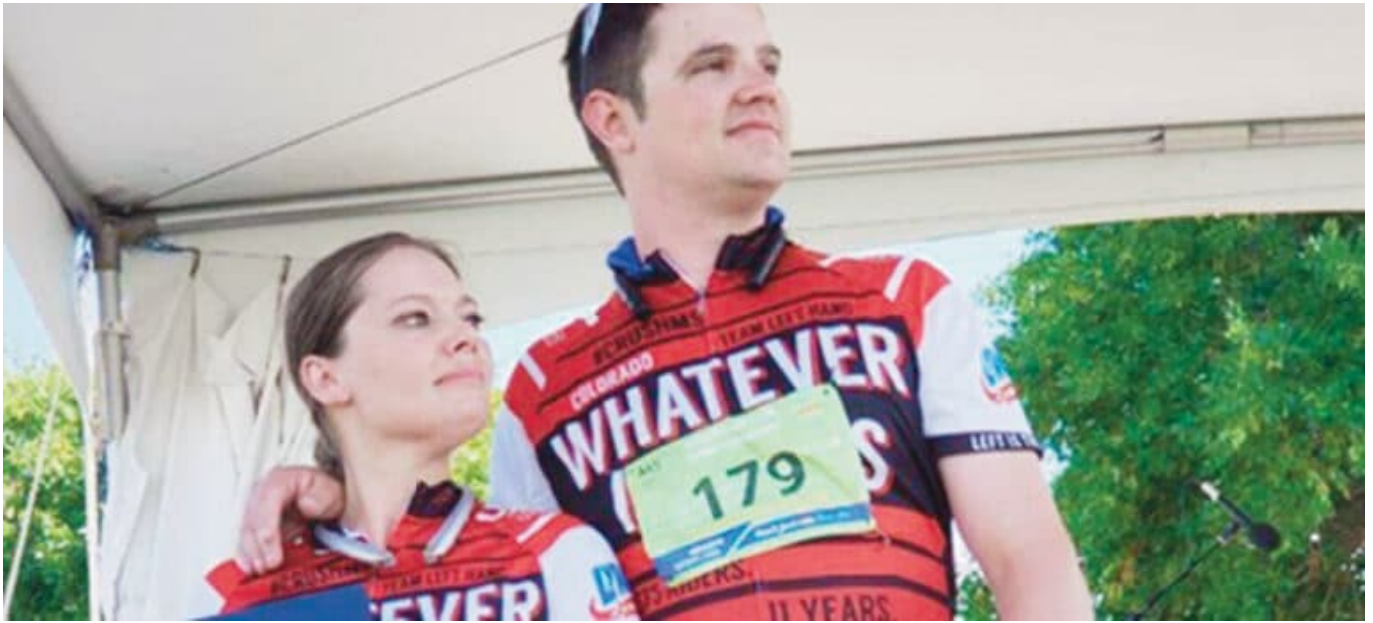


The meat of the matter



What started as a backyard kegger has grown into a major MS fundraiser and bicycle program.

by Kelsey Blackwell



Smoked sausages were cooked to feed more than 700 people at the 2018 Meat Fight. Photo courtesy of Alice Laussade

Imagine this: Before you, slice upon slice of melt-in-your-mouth beef brisket beckons. Ridiculously tender pork ribs that basically shimmy off the bone. What's more, plump smoked sausages compete for your attention. Where to begin? After eating your fill, you wash it all down with a cold beer and maybe a shot of whiskey or two. No, this isn't a dream. It's a Meat

Fight, and it's the kind of fight many dream of being in the middle of.

As its name implies, Meat Fight is about meat, but that's not the only draw for the more than 700 attendees who descend on Dallas, Texas, from across the country every November. Each tender meaty morsel is made all the sweeter by the true intention of the event: to raise funds to support people living with multiple sclerosis.

Toward that end, Meat Fight raised over \$225,000 in 2018. "That's really an extraordinary amount," says Leah Weatherl, associate vice president for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society's Bike MS. Since its inception in 2011 though, Meat Fight hasn't had to put up much of a fight to attract attention.

"It started as a kegger in my backyard," says Alice Laussade, Meat Fight's CEO, aka "The Mother of Meat Fight."



Meat Fight raised more than \$225,000 in 2018. Photo courtesy of Alice Laussade

A modest start

After her brother Jim Casey was diagnosed with MS in 2010, Laussade and her husband, Mike Laussade, threw the backyard party to raise the fundraising minimum necessary to join Casey at the Bike MS: Round Up Ride in Dallas.

"Our goal was \$600," Alice Laussade says. "That day, we brought in more than \$2,000. We were pretty proud and excited about that, but then one of my friends said, 'This 2K is cute, but you could raise so much more if you made this a public event.' I was like, I'm not an event planner. This is my backyard. This is not a public thing."

Despite her reservations, Laussade decided to give it a go. As a James Beard Award-winning food writer for the Dallas Observer, she leveraged her industry connections to see if she could get things smokin'. "We decided that if we could get four chefs and one brewery, we would go public," she says. "The brewery came on first, and we ended up with 12 chefs."

Since that first public event in 2012, Meat Fight has continued to sizzle. From hosting Parks and Rec star and self-proclaimed bacon aficionado Nick Offerman as a guest judge in 2013 to the more than 700 attendees and 50 chefs who participated in the event in 2018, the nonprofit organization is clearly clued in to a not-so-secret ingredient for success.

It's called 'fun-lanthropy'

"Fun is at the center of everything," Weatherl says. "They're doing extraordinary things, but they're making sure that people are having a good time while they're doing them."

Attendees agree. "It was 100 times more spectacular than anything I could have imagined," says Jeana Nozykowski, who was diagnosed with MS in 2003, of her first time at Meat Fight, which she attended with her husband. "We had the most fun stuffing ourselves with barbecue. It was a party—a party in my stomach and a party all around."



Alice Laussade, Meat Fight's CEO, is also known as "The Mother of Meat Fight." Photo courtesy of Alice Laussade

"Fun-lanthropy" isn't just about fun though, it's also about getting a younger group of people interested, involved and excited about philanthropy. So Meat Fight Inc. launched two more events: Chicken Thang, which takes place in February and raised \$23,000 in 2018; and Meat Fight 1K, which takes place in August and raised \$45,000 in 2018. During the 1k event, if attendees eat at 12 of 40 food and beverage stations, they get a finisher medal. "So if they're posting pictures online it looks like you did some sort of athletic event, but all you did was drink beer and eat barbecue all day," Laussade says.

Did you say Meat Bike?

If the food events are the "meat" of Meat Fight, call the nonprofit group's Meat Bike program the dry rub, which is to say, completely essential.

Meat Fight Inc. launched Meat Bikes in 2014 as a way to break down the barriers preventing

people with MS from participating in Bike MS events. Meat Bike provides a bicycle, gear and training to support anyone with MS willing to cross the start line of a Bike MS event, Laussade says.

While grit and determination are essential qualities for anyone gearing up for a Bike MS ride, for many people the first step is just believing that getting on a bike is possible.

“I was lying in bed, and I just decided, why not? I’m going to fill out the application [to get a Meat Bike],” says Quincy Wallace, who was diagnosed with MS in 2010 and lives in Fort Worth. “I was fat, and I knew I needed to exercise. I knew I wasn’t feeling good. I had been told that exercise was key, and I wasn’t exercising at all. I was approved [for Meat Bike] within a couple of weeks.”



Wendy Roberts, Alice Laussade and Ryan Beck from Performance Bicycle. Beck coached Roberts for her first ride. Photo courtesy of Alice Laussade

Laussade notes that the organization looks for people who are reliable and committed to doing the training to prepare for their Bike MS ride. To receive a bike, applicants commit to crossing the starting line of a race by the end of the following year. So far, more than 166 bikes have been donated.

“Since I got my bike in 2016, I’ve lost 40 pounds,” Wallace says. He now has a goal of riding his bike 150 miles a week and has completed several long-distance bike events in addition to Bike MS. “My wife says she got her husband back. It’s truly been a life-changing experience. Sometimes I don’t even think I’m sick because I’ve done so much more than I did before I

was sick.”

166 bikes, 166 stories

For the 166 bikes Meat Fight has now given away, there are likely 166 stories similar to Wallace’s.

“To say that my bike has changed my life is an understatement,” says Wendy Roberts who was diagnosed with MS in 2016 and lives in Longmont, Colorado. “I got on my Meat Bike and trained each week. I would set small goals, like I want to go 15 miles today and then 17 miles next time. On days my legs hurt really bad, I would just get on and go as far as I felt comfortable. Biking was something my husband and I could do together. In riding with each other, we both lost weight, we enjoyed more time together, and we are both happier as a result of this little Meat Bike of mine. I now think of myself as a Meat Fight ambassador. I have recruited several Meat Bike riders and have formed an amazing pack of Meat Fight friends across the U.S.”

The success is in the numbers. Meat Fight Bike Team has grown from seven riders in 2011 to more than 300 riders spanning 17 states.

“It’s become a \$1 million fundraising team for Bike MS,” Weatherl says. “There have only been about 100 teams in the roughly 40-year history of Bike MS to do that. And to do it in just seven years? Phenomenal!”

Go baby go

And why just stop at bikes? At Meat Fight, more is more.

Meat Fight launched Project 13 in 2016, which offers funding and coaching to a select group of athletes living with MS interested in participating in endurance challenges. So far, the program has funded 65 individuals willing and eager to take on a marathon, half marathon and/or Ironman event. Like the Meat Bike program, the first step to getting involved is believing in yourself.



From left to right, Kazumi Kojima, Michael Laussade and Emily Strittmatter at Meat Fight 2017. Photo courtesy of Alice Laussade

"I wasn't an unfit person, but I definitely didn't have that thing that I did on a regular basis. I've never been a runner," says Nozykowski who's training for her first half Ironman in April 2019. "I had a bike to go around town to get a coffee or go to the bookshop, but I wasn't a road cyclist. Heat was always an excuse, too."

From simply falling in love with Meat Fight to donating money to fund Meat Bikes to receiving one herself and now gearing up for her first endurance challenge, you could say that Nozykowski is pickin' the Meat Fight bone clean.

"When I completed just the bike portion of the Half Ironman relay last year, I kind of drank the Kool-Aid," she says. "Now I want to do the whole thing. I can't imagine doing these things even before I had MS. It's so strange how in so many ways a weakness has become a strength. I have MS. I have this disease that sometimes can present weaknesses in your physical abilities. If I hadn't ever been diagnosed who knows if I would have seen all these opportunities to do all these things. I feel so much stronger and so much more confident in my abilities than I ever would have been."

And that is what Meat Fight relishes: Helping people with MS feel better now, while going further than they ever thought they could go.

"It's a culture that they're creating," says Weatherl. "It's not just about the Meat Fight events or putting people on bikes and asking them to exercise. They're creating rolling support groups. That becomes very inspirational and motivational for people. They're getting healthy,

they're raising money to cure MS and they're having a good time. That's ultimately a win on everybody's part."

Kelsey Blackwell is a writer in Berkeley, California.

Are you a person living with MS who's ready to take on the Meat Bike Challenge? Want to apply to take on an Ironman with Project 13? Go to [Meat Fight](#) for more details.