

The 'Roar' of defeating MS



Kids band together to produce music video that goes viral and raises thousands of dollars for the cause.

by Shara Rutberg

In spite of the cheerful buzz and the tempting aroma of grilling lamb and garlic during the lunch rush at Abdallah's Lebanese Restaurant & Bakery in Houston one March afternoon, Rita Joubran rang up customers' tabs at the cash register through a dark cloud. It was 2010, and the then-34-year-old mother of three had recently been diagnosed with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis. The news had been weighing on Joubran and her family and, soon enough, began worrying the regular customers, as Joubran's mother shared her fears and concerns. But something was about to pierce through their gloom.

A customer walked in, and handed Joubran an orange bandana. "Would you sign this?" he asked.

Remembering the day, Joubran recalls recognizing the man as a regular customer. But she'd never seen the bandana before. He explained it was from the BP MS 150, the Houston to Austin Bike MS ride. After hearing about her diagnosis, the man said, he wanted to do something to help, so he found the ride online and signed up in her honor.

"I just started bawling," recalls Joubran.

"I knew him, but I never saw him outside the restaurant," she says. "For all intents and purposes, he was just an acquaintance. That he'd do this in my honor was just overwhelming."

The caring customer, Nathan Mery, would become one of Joubran's closest friends. And the Joubrans would begin a transformation from a family stunned in the aftermath of a diagnosis to a powerful force of advocacy and fundraising that would unleash an irresistible Katy Perry-

style “Roar” across the country.



The Joubran family at the Houston to Austin Bike MS ride. From left to right: Anees (AJ), George, Tanya, Rita and Nabil Joubran. Photo courtesy of Rita Joubran

New beginnings at the finish line

At first, Joubran and her husband, Nabil, helped with Mery’s fundraising. With their children, AJ, Tanya and George, they headed to Austin to watch him cross the finish line. They were bowled over by the scene of support and triumph.

“It was mind-boggling. It was humbling,” recalls Joubran. “I saw hope. I saw community. At that moment I realized that everything was going to be OK.”

Impassioned and inspired to help work for a cure, the Joubrans have been on a mission ever since.

Though he hadn’t ridden a bike since middle school, Nabil decided to ride in the next Bike MS from Houston to Austin in 2011. The couple launched into fundraising with the help of their tightly knit extended family and raised \$34,000.

Joubran signed up to ride in 2012 after the doctor cleared her to pedal. Together, the couple surpassed their goal of \$50,000.

Nabil and Rita signed up to ride again for the 2013 event but life, work and three kids kept them from fundraising as much as they would have liked. Sharing their concerns with one another one evening, they didn’t realize their children were listening.

Love, lyrics and making a difference

They might have known. After all, the children were nearly as invested in the MS movement as their parents were. In addition to giving up their parents to training most weekends, the Joubrans’ three children, AJ, Tanya and George, had volunteered during the Bike MS rides every year since Nabil started riding. Even the Joubrans’ nieces and nephews—Yasmeen Hage, 10, Nour Hage, 8, Vanessa Kmeid, 12, and Sammy Kmeid, 11—got in the act and volunteered. Tanya also baked, iced and handed out 500 chocolate cupcakes for riders. But cupcakes wouldn’t cut it for fundraising.

Twelve-year-old George had an idea—and an iPad. Most of all, he had a passion for making a difference. And though he was just a little boy when she was first diagnosed, George remembers how MS changed his otherwise energetic mother. “I remember her staying in the car outside during church because she was too tired to walk in,” he says. It was during this time that George decided he was going to become a doctor and focus on MS. But until he could realize that dream, he decided to focus on doing something now.

The tech-savvy kid convinced his siblings and cousins to join him in making their own version of “Roar,” his favorite singer Katy Perry’s hit song and video. He rewrote the lyrics into a disease-kicking battle cry and renamed it, “We’re Gonna Beat MS!”

George downloaded an app to help him produce his very first music video and directed AJ, then 15, Tanya, then 13, and their four cousins, through hours of rehearsals. For the entire two months of production, the siblings and cousins kept the video a secret from Rita and Nabil.

The result not only includes singing, dancing and split-screen effects, it also flashes statistics and information about MS. (At the time he made the video, there were 10 disease-modifying therapies for MS. Two more have been developed since.) It closes with a dedication to Rita, “our hero, who showed us to never give up and to always believe together, we can make a difference.”

Best halftime show ever

On Super Bowl Sunday in February 2014, George, Tanya and AJ gathered their parents around the iPad and told them they had a surprise.

Watching the video, “I was completely overwhelmed. I cried,” says Joubran. “Of course, I’ve seen it 100 times and I still cry every time I see it.”

“The pride, the amazement, the emotions that hit me were indescribable,” says Nabil. “We’re blessed. They made something great out of a bad situation.”

George, however, says that he simply felt “relieved we could actually do something to help.” And the fact that Katy Perry sang the song live during the Super Bowl halftime performance in 2015 helped to make both the “holiday” and the song that much more powerful for the family.

Raising the roof, and funds

The video helped the Joubrans raise an additional \$4,000 after they shared it on YouTube with a request for donations. Even more has been raised by other Bike MS teams who use it in their fundraising, Rita says. The kids even performed a live version during the Society’s Leadership Conference in Dallas last November.

“The awareness and publicity the Joubran children have created for their mother and all others living with MS is simply astonishing,” says Mark Neagli, National MS Society region executive vice president in the Texas area. “The Joubran family is truly changing the lives of people with MS.”

“We got hit with the disease out of nowhere,” says Nabil. “We were down in the dumps for a while. Then, we took it and made it a positive thing for our family. The drive to find a cure has given us a purpose. We didn’t really have one before, but we definitely have one now. And we gear most of our life toward it.”

“It’s a blessing in disguise,” says Rita. “As a family, we’ve been able to take something so negative and make such a positive thing out of it.”

To date, the Joubrans have raised more than \$250,000. George is busy at work on the next video.

Below: George Jourban and cousins sing live at the 2014 National MS Conference in Dallas.

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To learn more about DIY fundraising, visit nationalMSSociety.org/DIY.