

Trail blazers



Texans ride the range for MS research and programs.

by Shara Rutberg

In 1996, when the idea to start a Walk MS event was mentioned at a multiple sclerosis support group in Stephenville, Texas—known to residents as the “Cowboy Capital of the World”—members said, “No way.” It wasn’t lack of commitment, recalls Mary Howard, who was involved in the group because her husband has MS. “But we had to explain to them that this is cowboy country. We don’t walk. We ride.”

So the first annual Cowboy Capital MS Trail Ride was set for April, and more than 70 people and their horses showed up. Unfortunately, so did a bitter north wind. “It was the coldest day of the year,” says Howard, who became the event’s co-chair, along with her friend Diane Tidwell. “We looked like abominable snowmen out there. After that, we changed the date to the first Saturday in May,” she says, laughing.

Next year’s ride will be the 20th; each event to date has raised between \$10,000 and \$20,000 to support research and programs for people living with MS.

Hitting the trail

After fortifying themselves with coffee and breakfast burritos, riders saddle up and head out around 9 a.m., following a “trail boss” along a route that meanders through the spectacular 1,172-acre Hunewell Ranch, owned by Tarleton State University. The university makes the ranch available to the riders each year just for the event. Riders wind through towering stands of post oak, up and down hilly pastures, through stands of cacti and along the bottom of ravines. “We make sure it’s always an interesting ride,” says Tidwell, who helps set the

course.

Mid-morning, riders stop for a break, and volunteers provide water for riders and carrots for their horses. “We want everyone to be comfortable and well fed,” Tidwell says. The group heads out again for a few more hours of riding, until they head back at lunchtime to the starting area, enticed by the aroma of barbecued brisket mingling with sagebrush.

Posses and prizes

During lunch, riders bid on silent auction items, and organizers hold an awards ceremony, with prizes going to the top three fundraisers, the youngest and oldest rider (this year, a 3-year-old and a 73-year-old), and the participant who came from farthest away. Team trophies are given to the team with the most donations, the largest team and the team with the most spirit. To ride, each person must raise or donate at least \$50.

Emergency medical technicians and a veterinarian are on hand to care for any emergencies. And the Trail Posse, a gang of volunteers—some of whom dress like Old West sheriffs—rides among the participants to make sure everyone’s OK.

Other riders dress up too. “We’ve had a group of ladies on mules decked out in full cowgirl garb from head to toe, ready for a parade,” Tidwell says. Each year, Deborah Nowlin-Keith, who was the 2015 40+ Young County Rodeo Queen, rides her mule, IdaMay. This year, her tiara will be sparkling on top of her cowboy hat.

The event is growing. For the past few years, organizers also hold a 5K and a 2K fun run/walk along the trail after the horses head out—acknowledging that perhaps some Texans (and visitors) might prefer to walk, not ride.

Want to cowboy up?

Cowboy Capital MS Trail Ride co-chair Mary Howard and volunteer Hollie Hensley offer tips for anyone planning a similar event:

- It’s critical to have terrain that’s interesting enough for a few hours of riding.
- Having parking space for a lot of horse trailers is key.
- Get the word out about the event and kick off the fundraising as early as possible—at least three months beforehand.
- Make it as easy as possible for people to register and raise money, perhaps using an online form.

Volunteer roundup

Volunteers (and spouses) Hollie and Willis Hensley help clear and mark the six-mile trail each year, starting a month in advance to battle thorny brambles and cacti with machetes and chainsaws. One year, while flagging the course on horseback, they came upon a crowd that

doesn't usually attend Society events: a herd of wild hogs. "There were about eight adults, about 150 to 200 pounds each, and 25 babies," says Hollie, recalling how the porkers scattered once they noticed the horses, who remained unfazed. Hollie has been volunteering since the first trail ride, and it wasn't long before Willis joined her. Neither one has MS, but through the event, Hollie says, they have become connected to a great many people affected by the disease.

Volunteers are critical to the event, which is a lot of work, admits Howard, explaining that everything from water troughs for the horses to a giant mobile grill must be hauled onto the site, which has no water or electricity.

As for Howard, the 70-year-old has no plans of stepping down from her role as event co-chair. She says in a warm Texas drawl: "As long as my husband has MS and there's no cure, I'll do it until I die."

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To learn more about starting your own fundraiser, visit nationalMSSociety.org/DIY.