

Walking their way



Walk MS is for everyone— including those with mobility challenges.

by **Matt Alderton**

At the more than 500 Walk MS events that take place around the country each year, the sounds of scooters, wheelchairs and walkers join the melody of thousands of feet moving forward—all united in the effort to change the world for people with MS through research, services, connections, awareness, advocacy and more.

“Walk MS is for everyone,” emphasizes Walk MS Director Samantha Gardner. “It is much more than a walk. It’s an event for friends and family to come together and show their support, make a difference with their fundraising efforts and be inspired by others. But most importantly, it’s perfect for those living with MS to be powerful leaders in the MS movement.”

At Walk MS fundraisers in all 50 states, Society staff and volunteers make sure everyone can get involved by designing events that are fully accessible not only to participants who can walk, but also to those who use mobility aids of any kind. For instance, Walk MS organizers intentionally seek out locations where there is ample accessible parking, where there are wheelchair-accessible restrooms, and where walk routes are obstruction-free. Additionally, all Walk MS events offer a choice of routes—typically a 1-mile option and a 3-mile option—so that everyone can share in the same sense of accomplishment, regardless of their physical stamina.

Following are three stories from people who crossed the finish line.

Leading by example

Renee Newman is a strong believer in Newton's first law of motion: A body at rest stays at rest, while a body in motion stays in motion. When she was diagnosed with MS in 2007, she therefore resolved to keep moving.

"I try to keep my limbs moving as much as possible so I can stay mobile longer," says Newman, 60, of Tempe, Arizona. Arthritis and balance issues, however, make walking difficult, so she typically uses a walker or motorized scooter outside her home.

Newman has a lot of friends with similar mobility challenges. Because they don't like standing out, however, they're reluctant to use assistive devices. She decided to attend her first Walk MS in 2010 because she wanted to set a positive example for them.

Newman can relate to her friends' concerns. Because she wasn't sure how accessible that first event would be, she volunteered at the information desk. When she saw how inclusive Walk MS was, however, she came back the next year as a participant. She initially used her walker but has come back every year since with her scooter, as well as a bag packed with medical supplies, toileting provisions and a change of clothes.

"I bring everything I might need with me, which frees me up to just have a good time," says Newman, whose 20-person team, "Team Renee," raised \$3,380 in 2014.

'I just kept going'

When Daryl Hoefs was diagnosed with MS in 2011, at first he mourned for the things he could no longer do. "Hunting was one of my favorite hobbies, and now I can't do it anymore," because it requires balancing on a platform in a tree, says Hoefs, 68, of Waupun, Wisconsin.

But Hoefs is determined to prove that there are many other things he can do—including Walk MS, which he's completed each of the last two years. "The first year, I did the 1-mile walk because that's all I could manage," says Hoefs, who uses a walker because of his balance issues. "The next year I made up my mind to do the 3-mile walk. It wasn't easy, but I was determined to make it to the end no matter what."

He took it slow and steady with his walker until he crossed the finish line, surrounded by a cheering crowd. "I was a half-hour behind everyone else, but I didn't care. I just kept going," continues Hoefs, whose wife walked with him. "I was ready to fall down and start crawling, but I didn't. I made my goal, and it felt really good to do it. And when I did it, everyone there had a grand celebration."

Finding hope

Stephanie Murdock found out she had MS in February 2014, when she suddenly lost the use of her legs.

"From my knees down, I was completely numb," recalls Murdock, 25, of Livingston, Texas. "I went to the hospital and was there for about a month and a half."

While Murdock was still in the hospital, she decided to participate in Walk MS. When she was released, she assembled a team of 30 friends and family members and caravanned over 200 miles north to Fort Worth to attend the next available Walk.

“That first year it was really about being out in the MS community and seeing what kind of resources are out there,” says Murdock, who participated using a wheelchair since she was still unable to walk.

For Murdock, Walk MS wasn’t just a walk; it was a welcome mat. “I actually made several friends along the walk, including the volunteers who were working at the event,” Murdock says. “If I hadn’t gone to a walk so soon I probably would have been a little bit lost. It was a great place to start, in terms of being newly diagnosed and reaching out to the MS community.”

Murdock returned to Fort Worth last year for her second walk, and this time she got out of her wheelchair to cross the finish line on foot.

“One day I will walk the whole walk with no assistance,” she says. “That is my goal, and I will make it happen.”

Matt Alderton is a Chicago-based freelance writer.

To learn more or to register for Walk MS, visit walkMS.org.