

When the spirits move you



BourbonHam offers a unique experience while it raises funds for MS.

by Shara Rutberg

Bottles clink in the background as the band blasts Van Morrison covers. Volunteers pour 75 types of bourbon for 1,300 guests. A cloud of friendly conversations in warm southern drawls resounds through the evening. The mouthwatering aroma of four whole hogs, smoked by a James Beard Award-winning barbecue pit master, infuses the inside of a 1924 brick building, once home to the Mack Truck Co.



From left, BourbonHam chair Brian Guilbeau, event founder Scott Thorne and Andrew Bell,

president of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society's Alabama-Mississippi area. Photo courtesy of Focus Creative

Welcome to BourbonHam

In January 2019, the fourth annual BourbonHam bourbon and barbecue tasting in Birmingham, Alabama, raised thousands of glasses in toasts and \$125,000 for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

"Never in a million years did I think it would get this big," says the event's co-founder, Scott Thorne, who had been thrilled with the event's first-year attendance of 400. Walking into that inaugural event in 2015, Thorne recalls being overwhelmed by what the efforts of all the BourbonHam volunteers had brought to fruition. "It was one of the greatest moments of my life," he recalls. It stemmed, however, from one of the worst.

Just a few days before Christmas 2014, Thorne was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He was 43. "It was the Christmas gift that kept on giving," he says. "I was devastated. But I am not one to sit on my rear end."

Within two weeks, he was instead sitting in the office of Andrew Bell, president of the Society's Alabama-Mississippi area.

"There are two things I love," Bell recalls Thorne saying. "I love bourbon. And I love barbecue. Now I also live with MS. I want to use my energy for something I'm passionate about to do something to improve the lives of people with MS. I want to take the energy that could veer into a negative space in my head and use it in a positive way."

Bell often gets pitched ideas that never see the light of day, so he wasn't putting the event on the calendar yet. But he was about to learn that Thorne is a man who knows how to put on a show.



Photo courtesy of Focus Creative

Thorne teaches show choir at Homewood High School just outside of Birmingham where he conceives, arranges, hires choreographers and directs 150 teenagers in 20 minutes of full-on Broadway-style musical theater with spinning, shimmying, pop-and-locking action interspersed with several high-speed costume changes. His enthusiasm fuels the kids on a year long journey from sheet music to spotlight. Then, they take the show on the road to compete.

Thorne says BourbonHam was an event that was just “meant to be,” due to a couple serendipitous events. The day he met Bell, he had had lunch with a fellow bourbon enthusiast who brought along another bourbon-loving friend he’d never met, Brian Guilbeau.

Guilbeau happened to work for Republic National Distributing Co., the country’s second-largest wholesale wine and spirits distributor. The men talked bourbon and barbecue along with Thorne’s diagnosis and his idea for a fundraiser. Guilbeau initially agreed to help, thinking he’d solicit donations. But his involvement quickly grew far beyond that. “Brian took my idea, gave it steroids and took it to all the distilleries and suppliers,” Thorne says.

One morning shortly after meeting Guilbeau, with bourbon and barbecue on his mind, Thorne was watching the local news when the anchorwoman signed off “live from Birmingham.” “But with her Southern accent, I thought she said ‘BourbonHam,’” he recalls. “I thought: ‘Oh my lord, it’s perfect!’”

Armed with a brilliant event name and a co-founder who shared his passion, Thorne made things happen. “In the MS community, we talk about people who are resilient in terms of the disease,” Bell says. “Scott was resilient to every challenge that came up in terms of putting on this event. He’s just an amazing person and was the visionary for this. He never let up.”

Working year-round

Thorne, Guilbeau and a committee of volunteers work year-round on BourbonHam, which has grown 50 percent year over year. All the bourbon is donated. One hundred volunteers give their time. The slate of sponsors is growing, as are the day's offerings, which include seminars with master distillers, a cigar lounge, a silent auction and bourbon educators strolling through the crowds, spreading the distilled gospel, particularly among novice bourbon enthusiasts. A pamphlet describes each batch and gives information about MS. Live football games play on TVs while educational slides about MS flash across jumbo screens. Guests choose from four types of tickets based on the level of spirits poured for each (at least 20 per level). Tickets range from a \$25 barbecue-only pass to a \$100 VIP ticket.



BourbonHam draws crowds and raises awareness about MS.

Photo courtesy of Focus Creative

"We want to give people an experience," Guilbeau says, "take them out of the everyday, like going to a concert."

"People in the South, we love to eat, we love to gather, we love connecting face-to-face—so something like this is a home run," says Bell of BourbonHam's popularity. "And bourbon is hot," adds Guilbeau, noting the whiskey boom became part of the mainstream due to popular television series such as "Mad Men."

A new perspective

"Raising awareness about MS is so important," Thorne says. "When I was diagnosed, I didn't know anything about it, other than thinking 'Isn't that what Montel Williams and Annette Funicello have?' I wanted to raise awareness, especially among a younger demographic."

He has. The crowd at BourbonHam skews younger—around 25–45, Bell notes.

A few weeks after BourbonHam 2019, the co-founders were already planning on how to expand the event in 2020.

“I certainly wish I never got MS,” Thorne says, “But at the same time, it’s given me so much focus in my life. It put everything in perspective. Now, I’m driven to make things happen. That’s where my passion lies, raising money to help people living with the disease.”

He does so in spite of the MS-related fatigue that clobbers him some days along with cramps and the MS hug. “I’m in front of 200 kids a day, and they’ve all seen me on days I can hardly hold my head up,” Thorne says. “At that same time, they’re seeing somebody being strong, fighting a disease. I hope that one day, if something challenging is going on in their lives they can look back and think ‘Hey, remember Mr. Thorne in high school? He just kept going.’”

While Thorne hopes to set an example for students, he says his kids truly helped him find his way through his diagnosis—though they don’t know it.

Each show choir performance has a theme. In 2017, Thorne created a show around grief. While students thought about grief felt by parents when children leave home, or grief felt at the end of a romantic relationship as they sang and danced through the year, Thorne grieved his health and worked through the emotions fueling his MS journey. In a YouTube video of the Homewood High Show Choir’s competition performance, 150 kids bounced around to a cheerful “Ready for the Good Life,” melt into the BeeGee’s “Tragedy,” segue into a chilling “Dust in the Wind,” and “Riding the Storm Out,” before building to the finale “Carry On,” which crescendos as the girls in sequined gowns and boys in tuxedo jackets skip exuberantly off stage. They won.

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Visit ntlms.org/DIY to start your own DIY fundraiser.

Learn more about [BourbonHam](#).