Going the Extra mile

Annual walk raises research funds, awareness for multiple sclerosis

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While attending a multiple sclerosis conference in Pennsylvania, Ryan Meushaw noticed he was one of the only people standing in a room full of wheelchair-bound men and women.

That’s when it hit him. The Westminster resident realized he could possibly lose the ability to walk someday.

“It brought me down, but not enough to completely break my spirit,” Meushaw, 18, said. “I’m not going to let MS affect school, and I’m not going to let it affect my career.”

MS is an unpredictable, often disabling disease of the central nervous system that interrupts the flow of information within the brain and between the brain and body, according to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

The National Multiple Sclerosis Society kicked off its 15th annual Walk MS in Westminster Sunday morning at the Carroll County Farm Museum.

Collin Wainwright, 10, left, and Ryan Meushaw lead a group of walkers along Center Street during the Walk MS event in Westminster Sunday.

Please see Mile, A9
The walkers, mostly clad in orange T-shirts, trekked throughout the city, making their way to the Westminster City Park and back to the farm museum.

The organization raised about $63,000 of its $80,000 goal for the Westminster site, said Mark Roeder, Maryland Chapter president of the MS Society. The event hosted 475 registered walkers on Sunday, and donors have until June 1 to turn in money to support the cause, Roeder said.

"Westminster is a very generous community," Roeder said. "Each year, the event gets bigger, the donations get larger and the enthusiasm gets better and better."

The 5K walk is arranged each year to help raise funds to support research, drive change through advocacy and facilitate professional education and provide programs and services to help people with MS, Roeder said. The National MS Society Maryland Chapter hosts 10 walk sites throughout the state between April 2 and April 16. Upcoming walk sites include Hagerstown, Havre de Grace and Ocean City.

Many of the walkers wore shirts with team names printed on them. Meushaw's supporters sported orange T-shirts to represent The Ry Team. Orange represents the color for the MS Society.

Meushaw was diagnosed with MS at age 15. He's experienced extreme dizziness, double vision and was partially blind in his right eye. But he's remained optimistic. He said he would never let the thought of not being able to walk get in the way of planning his future. He is currently attending Carroll Community College, where he plans to study nursing.

Before the walkers took off, Westminster Mayor Kevin Utz gave a speech and declared Sunday Walk MS Day in the city. Minutes later, he cut an orange ribbon and the eager walkers began the 3 mile trek.

Mike Garzon, of Elkridge, said he was walking for his sister, Jessica Kester. She was diagnosed with MS about a year and a half ago, he said. Kester was supposed to walk that morning, but she gave birth around 1 a.m. Sunday at Carroll Hospital Center, Garzon said.

"It's just a baby, she should be out here walking," Garzon joked.

Throughout the walk, people chatted, young boys and girls raced one another and some pushed their wheelchair-bound loved ones.

Dwayne "DJ" Doody said he was happy to see so many people at the event. He was diagnosed with the disease in 2009 and has since experienced speech and walking problems. He was in a wheelchair Sunday, and about 15 people came out to walk with him.

"I have good family and friends that keep me motivated," Doody said.

It was Doody's second year attending the walk, and he said he would definitely participate next year.

Some of the 15 people supporting Doody Sunday were Tara Sluder, 35, her 8-year-old son Jordan, and her niece Christina Jacobs of DJ's Team. Jacobs, 21, said the walk was a great way to raise money and awareness. It's very uplifting, she said.

As walkers reached the finish line, they were greeted with loud cheers and some people snapped photos. Others handed out shirts and orange wristbands that said "Cure MS" on them.

The Sole Sistas, a group of seven walkers, attended the walk to support their mutual friends who have MS. Amy Thompson, of Westminster, said it was the first year she and her friends joined together for the walk. Each of the Sole Sistas was clad in matching shirts.

"We had seven this year, and next year there will be more," Thompson, 40, said.

Team Hoppe started with five walkers in 2006, but Sunday there were about 25 walkers consisting of family and friends.

"Every year we have to order more shirts," Jessica Hoppe, 26, said. "Our team's getting bigger and bigger."

Jessica and her brother Michael, 23, were walking for their mother Linda, 48. Linda was diagnosed with MS five years ago, and Walk MS has become a family tradition. Each morning before the walk, family and friends enjoy a big breakfast together, Linda said.

Though the disease continues to slow her down, the walk with family and friends boosted her spirits.

"It's a wonderful feeling," Linda said. "It makes me feel good."

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