



# TAKING THE HIGH ROAD

Canada gets active in the battle against Multiple Sclerosis

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It's news that any family would dread to hear about one of their own: finding out that an immediate relative has been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. A disease that affects the brain and spinal cord, it runs the gamut of potentially harmful effects—all the way from impaired speech to paralysis of the lower and upper limbs.

Nearly 13 years ago, the Billesberger family was hit with this dose of reality when they found out that their mother, Janice, was suffering from the disease. Though she was only ten years old at the time, U of A grad student Lisa Billesberger can still recount the initial feeling of finding out that her mother had been stricken with such a life-altering affliction.

"I remember when my mom was first diagnosed with MS, the thing that you really remember is that you feel very helpless," Billesberger explained. "There are so many unknowns about this disease that you feel as though you can do nothing for her to help her feel better."

Instead of letting her emotions depress her over the matter, Billesberger—who is about to enter her second year of a Master's degree in medical microbiology and immunology—decided to take the initiative. She put together a team to participate in the MS SuperCities Walk, held annually in 162 locations across Canada, helping to raise both money and awareness in the lengthy battle against MS.

"When I first heard about the Walk, I thought it was a really good opportunity to take action against the disease, instead of wallowing in my own helplessness," Billesberger explained. "On a personal level, it kind of gave me a chance to get back at the disease."

In 2006, Lisa's team—nicknamed "Blast MS to the Past"—participated in their first Walk. Statistics say that one in three Canadians likely know someone living with MS—and in the case of this team, as it turned out, the disease affected more of their lives than they had originally thought.

"It's actually interesting because, I mean, most of the people on my team know my mother, so they know someone who's living with the disease," Billesberger said. "But, as we were forming the team, some of our members talked to their families, and I know, in at least one case, that one of our team members found out that someone in their family had MS that she didn't know about. So it made more personal to her."

The team, which consists of fellow graduate students, personal friends,

and family members, felt rewarded by their experience the first time around: not only did they want to return for a second year, they wanted to expand their operation.

"Most of my team is actually made up of graduate students, and as such we're really, really busy, so I guess we set ourselves a very modest goal, and that was mainly just to increase the number of team members," Billesberger explained. "Last year, I believe we had something like twelve members, and this year we actually had 20, so we were very happy with that."

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"In terms of monetary goals, I believe the total numbers aren't in yet, but with the online donations, we have about \$3200, and then with the offline donations, I imagine that number will get closer towards \$4000."

This year marked the 17th edition of the MS SuperCities Walk in Edmonton (and Canada). The event took place on 27 May at Rundle Park, where teams of walkers could participate in 3km and 15km routes, as well as a special 10km route with wheelchair accessibility. This year's Walk featured many special guests as well, including Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach, Edmonton MLA Bharat Agnihotri, Conservative MP Laurie Hawn, and CTV's Erin Isfeld, who was the event's MC.

"I think it was one of the best events that we've ever had, and we were really excited about it," MS SuperCities Walk manager Mona Pattison said. "We haven't finished counting all the money and putting it into the computer, but we know we're over \$400 000, which is fantastic, and it means that we're well on our way to our goal of \$540 000."

Part of the money raised goes towards funding research that will

aid in discovering possible preventative treatments for MS; the other portion is used to provide care services for people—numbering nearly 11 000 in Alberta and almost 75 000 nationwide—who are already living with the disease.

"We want to find a cure and prevent people from getting MS, but we recognize that there are people living with it right now," Pattison explained. "So, some of the money goes towards yoga classes, information sessions for any people diagnosed, and other things of that nature."

Funding from events such as the Walk—the MS Society's largest fundraiser—has benefited researchers and drug developers, allowing them to make the breakthroughs necessary in both keeping the disease at bay and, in some cases, variably improving the conditions of some who are affected until a cure is found. For all that, Lisa Billesberger and her family are truly thankful.

Initially, Billesberger said, the disease "really did affect [her mother] to the point where she was, essentially, bed-ridden for a period of up to six months.

"Her vision was very blurry, cognition was impaired; she had numbness, dizziness—those sort of things. But with the advent of a lot of the new immuno-regulatory drugs, it has improved her life to the point where she can play the piano again, wear high-heels, etc.

"If you were to see her in a store, you wouldn't actually be able to tell if she had this disease—which is why I think I'm so passionate about raising the money to sponsor the research for so many other people, too."

For this team, though, it's a must: apart from providing ample support for the cause, it helps to maintain a positive attitude, keep the mood light, and make sure that the experience of taking part in the Walk is a fulfilling one.

Along with the obvious implication of their name, "Blast MS to the Past" also likes to dress the part: this year, the team walked in '60s garb as an homage to the love-and-peace culture of that time.

"Everyone was really excited to be there—our team was really having a lot of fun dressed up as hippies. And then, we were just really proud of ourselves, too, for raising this money. I mean, it was a Sunday morning: people are usually busy, some people are sick, but nobody is complaining. Everyone is there, completely altruistically, to do something for a good cause."

