

The New Jersey Metro Chapter is proud to introduce our Bike MS 2015 Ambassador – Sandie Reilly!

“Sandie is one of those quiet inspirations,” Mary Beth Rehrer, Director of Bike MS, said. “She doesn’t stand up and say ‘Look at me, and what I do for others.’ She just does it and makes a difference.”

“I ride because I can,” said Sandie. “And if my riding encourages just one person to stop living in fear of MS and begin living in spite of MS, then every mile, every saddle sore, every drop of perspiration will be very well spent.”

Sandie began cycling with the chapter nine years ago. Each year, in May and September, Sandie joins the New Jersey Metro Chapter for Bike MS as a dedicated volunteer road marshal.

Her cycling résumé doesn’t end there. In addition to volunteering at Bike MS, Sandie has raced road, mountain and track, is a USA Cycling Level 2 Coach, runs weekly ladies rides, and works part time at Ridgewood Cycle. She is passionate about adaptive cycling, works with para-cyclists at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado and the Helen’s Angels Cycling team in NY, and teaches cycling to children with Autism.

“I live and breathe cycling,” Sandie said. “And it’s all because I made that first step, got off the couch, decide to live in spite of MS and participate in my first bike tour. None of the rest would have happened if I didn’t stumble on the Bike MS site in the middle of the night in August 2006. None of it.”

Sandie was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1987. She recalled her diagnosis story in full detail, “It was a Sunday evening in early February. I had finished a weekend of homework and was lounging in front of the TV in my apartment,” she said.

Sandie noticed that her fingers and legs “felt odd” — “A bit tingly,” she said, “Like they were falling asleep.”

A few days later, Sandie’s symptoms worsened, so she went to a neurologist, who put her through a series of tests. “I was asked to ‘walk heel to toe,’ and I had a hard time,” Sandie said.

“‘Close my eyes and touch my nose my finger tip,’ and I missed — big time,” she continued.

“‘Stand straight, legs shoulder width apart and close my eyes,’ Sandie paused, “I nearly fell over.”

After her tests, the neurologist wanted Sandie to stay in the hospital. Sandie was extremely reluctant. “I was a college student, living in my own little apartment and working to support myself. I was engaged and getting married in less than six months,” she said.

To Sandie, hospitals weren't made for someone young like her. They were for the elderly, the sick, the dying. "I told him to give me whatever drugs I needed, and I'd take them at home," said Sandie.

Just two days later, though, Sandie's mind changed. "I was powerless over what was happening to me," she said. "And, when it occurred to me that I might not be able to dial the phone for help the next morning, I had friends take me to the hospital."

Sandie spent 10 days in the hospital before the doctors told her she had MS. For her entire list of questions — "How long until I recover? When would I get it again? How often? Would I ever recover? Should I diet? Quit smoking? Exercise?" — there seemed to be just one answer, "We don't know."

Sandie felt deflated, "I was sent off into a trip I hadn't planned on with no road map, no guidance or pioneers to follow. Just a warning to 'watch out!'"

It's hard not to relate to Sandie's story. After receiving life-changing news, she was looking for a silver lining, along with guidance. "I desperately needed to hear that life wasn't over, that there was still hope," she said. "But I heard none."

In 1970, the average time of a person's first MS symptom until a definite diagnosis was seven years. MS breakthroughs sometimes expanded knowledge of the disease, but increased confusion. In 1987, there just weren't many options available to people diagnosed with MS. It wasn't even until the '80s that treatment trials began.

And so, Sandie "stepped gingerly back into life," minimizing her activity in hopes to diminish her risk. It wasn't until a friend was diagnosed with ALS that Sandie began to reevaluate her lifestyle.

"I realized then that, in comparison, I was merely inconvenienced while he was given a death sentence," she said. "I was sitting around wasting my life in fear of the chair while he made the choice to live in spite of the chair. It was time for me to make a change."

In 2006, Sandie registered for Bike MS: Great New Jersey Country Ride, now called Bike MS: County Challenge. It had been 15 years since Sandie was on a bicycle. "I had just 3 ½ weeks to go from couch potato to cyclist, but I was committed," she said.

"Signing up for that tour, completely unprepared, was the best thing I've ever done for myself," she added.

Since that first ride, Sandie has joined the chapter as a Bike MS ride marshal for two of our chapter rides, Bike MS: Coast the Coast and Bike MS: Hops to Hops (now Bike MS: Barrels and Brews).

"Her role as a ride marshal gives her hands-on interaction with many participants and helps them make their Bike MS ride the best experience it could be," said Mary Beth.

After 20 years of handling her MS independently, Sandie had connected with the Society and was impressed. Its information, wellness and social programs, financial and housing assistance, had positioned the Society as a haven of hope for people living with MS.

“The Society offers hope in the face of fear and uncertainty,” she said. “And if that hope can propel one scared, isolated couch potato into becoming a successful coach with a career with the capacity to change the lives of many others, then we must ensure that hope not only survives, but thrives.”

“As long as we have our amazing volunteers and generous donors,” Sandie continued, “our riders, walkers and muckers, our fundraisers and so many selfless people who care enough to fight for the cause, we will have hope. And, we will have much to offer to ease the sting of hearing the words, ‘You have MS.’”