



THE VILLELLA FAMILY SHOW SUPPORT AT WALK MS.

debilitating disease was going to be one of my passions.

My latest and most impactful volunteer opportunity came when I was asked to participate in the 2015 Public Policy Conference in Washington, D.C. from March 9 to 11. I remember the day that I received the call to participate. As I listened to what would be involved as a participant, I was struck speechless. I was overwhelmed with emotion at being asked to be an MS advocate for a cause so important and so near to my heart.

After weeks of preparation, it was time to head to Washington. Upon my arrival at the conference, I saw people of all ages and races supporting this cause. Everyone had a story to tell: some have MS themselves, some have loved ones with MS and some work for the National MS Society. But we were all there for one reason - to fuel impact for change.

Initially, we gathered as a group for our welcome and a reception. The next day we attended workshops, starting with a session about how to craft our stories that we would be sharing with our legislators. During this session, I was asked to share my story. Everyone attending the conference had a story behind their advocacy, but to be able to share my family's story was truly an incredible moment. Throughout the day, we were educated on the policy priorities

FUELING IMPACT FOR CHANGE

BY SAMANTHA VILLELLA, MS ADVOCATE AND MS AMBASSADOR

My journey of advocating for multiple sclerosis began in the summer of 2008 when my mom, Kathy, was diagnosed with primary-progressive MS after living with symptoms since 2000. After her diagnosis, a friend told us about the Mahoning Valley Walk MS and our family decided to participate. In 2012, to raise additional funds and awareness, my siblings and I created a non-profit 501(c)3 organization to support the National MS Society's Ohio Buckeye Chapter. In March 2014, my sister Nikki, was diagnosed with relapsing-remitting MS. At that moment, I knew that being an MS advocate for those who live with this

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that we would be presenting on our Capitol Hill visit.

Finally, the day of advocacy arrived. MS activists came together and headed to Capitol Hill to meet with their senators and representatives to share their stories and request support for policy priorities.



JENNIFER HAMILTON (LEFT) AND SAMANTHA VILLELLA VISITED WASHINGTON D.C. TO ADVOCATE FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH MS.

My day started with a visit to Senator Rob Portman's office and then on to the offices of Representatives Tim Ryan, Bob Gibbs and James Renacci. After leaving Representative Ryan's office, I was overcome with emotion. Two of the MS employees with me each put a hand on my shoulder and reassured me that what I was doing was truly important.

It was at that instant that I realized I had the opportunity to make an impact on our leaders and their decisions. My commitment to my mom, my sister and all of those who have MS is that I will be their voice - I will be an MS activist. I plan to continue advocating so that one day MS will be a thing of the past. ■

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participation in the Lorain County Walk MS event. Three years ago I started my own team, "Teresa's Wobblers," and we have raised thousands of dollars for local programs, services and MS research.

I won't lie, I still have bad days but my motto is, "I'm a fighter, a survivor and MS will not win!" ■

MS ACTION DAY

MS advocates from across Ohio participated in MS Action Day on March 17, 2015. Advocates met with state representatives and senators to discuss the National MS Society's position on the Ohio Budget (HB 64). In the meetings, advocates asked legislators

to ensure Ohioans have access to public or private health coverage regardless of health or disability, economic status, employment status, age, claims history or risk.

Advocates also asked legislators to remove language regarding access to coverage



PAM BENNETT (LEFT) AND DEB GREYTAK TAKE ACTION ON MS ACTION DAY.

of independent providers. For more information on the issues or to learn about becoming an advocate, please email Tony Bernard at tony.bernard@nmss.org or call 614-515-4608. ■