



SAMANTHA VILLELLA (left) is presented with the *District Activist Leader of the Year Award* from Karen Mariner (right), vice president of state and local government relations for the National MS Society.

Villella's Commitment To Raise Awareness Of MS Recognized With National Award

Samantha Villella, of Boardman, traveled to Washington, D.C. Mar. 14-16 to meet with legislators as part of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society's 25th annual Public Policy Conference. The conference brought more than 350 volunteers from around the country to celebrate advocacy accomplishments and to educate elected officials about the needs of people affected by multiple sclerosis.

It was a special event for VILLELLA as she was recognized with the first *District Activist Leader of the Year Award*. Villella received the award for demonstrating a deep understanding of the MS Society's advocacy priorities and for raising awareness for the MS movement by connecting with elected officials. Specifically, she has fostered key relationships with elected officials, cultivated friendships with key staff members, aided efforts to better understand constituent relations and made those around her aware of opportunities to advocate for change.

A recent example of Villella's advocacy efforts was her contact with U.S. Representative Tim Ryan's office. She enlisted his help to raise awareness about multiple sclerosis as she worked with the congressman and his staff to get a proclamation declaring March as *MS Awareness Month*.

The Villella family has been affected not once, but twice, by an MS diagnosis.

Samantha's mom, Kathy, was diagnosed with the disease in 2008 and her sister, Nikki, was diagnosed with MS in 2014. Since 2009, the family has been participating in the Mahoning Valley Walk MS event with their KV's Krew Walk MS Team, affectionately named in honor of Kathy. They will be participating in this year's Walk MS event on Apr. 16, 2016 at the Scrappers Stadium, starting at 8:00 a.m.

To raise additional funds and awareness, Samantha and her siblings created a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization in 2012 to support the National MS Society's Ohio Buckeye Chapter and The Oak Clinic for Multiple Sclerosis. To date, they have raised more than \$52,000 for MS research, education and assistance for those with MS who are in financial need.

"My commitment to my mom, my sister, and all of those who have MS is that I will be their voice," Villella said. "I will be an MS activist. I plan to continue advocating and working with elected officials so that one day MS will be a thing of the past."