

MDA camp in the summer of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has rewritten everyone’s plans for 2020, including those involved with the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA), NALC’s official charity. But letter carriers have never given up on their support for MDA, and now they are doing what they have done from the very beginning to help deliver the cure—they are adapting.

For almost 70 years, letter carriers have devoted their time to raising tens of millions of dollars and providing volunteer support for MDA. With our help, the organization has made tremendous advances toward medical treatments for muscular dystrophy—including treatments that extend and

improve lives—and has developed programs to help people with neuromuscular diseases live life to the fullest.

NALC’s partnership with MDA dates to the earliest days of the charity, which was founded in 1950. The union named MDA as its official charity in 1952, becoming the first such national sponsor of the group. The union’s initial nationally coordinated campaign to raise funds for MDA was during Thanksgiving week in 1953, when tens of thousands of letter carriers in more than 800 cities returned to their routes for a second time after completing their heavy-volume holiday mail deliveries. The all-volunteer effort was called “The Letter Carrier March

for Muscular Dystrophy.” Individual letter carriers repeated their appointed rounds in the evening, soliciting donations door to door. Because of the late hour, the volunteers got the nickname of “the porch light brigade.”

Each year since then, letter carriers have held new and inventive fundraising events, such as bowloathons, raffles, walks and bike rides. Letter carriers also volunteer at MDA Summer Camps, where thousands of children with neuromuscular diseases make friends, grow more confident and get the chance to enjoy life like other kids each summer.

Now, though, such activities have come to a halt as the pandemic has gripped the nation. Traditional fundraising events that brought people together became impossible, and MDA canceled its summer camps for the year.

Instead of giving up, however, MDA and NALC are finding new ways to serve these children.

MDA is conducting online camps this summer to keep children connected and engaged. With the help of adult volunteers who facilitate the conversations, participants are meeting virtually to have fun doing activities including art and craft projects, cooking, making music, scavenger hunts and a virtual escape room.

To sustain NALC’s commitment to raising funds for MDA, in support of programs such as summer camps as well as medical research, during the pandemic, NALC Assistant to the President for Community Services Christina Vela Davidson issued a branch Deliver the Cure challenge in July. She asked branches to create a virtual donation page to support NALC’s 2020 campaign for MDA, and called on every letter car-



An online ad helping MDA raise money for its Virtual Summer Camp



After the cancellation of her branch's bowlathon, Michele Szafran sold face masks to raise money for MDA.



rier to give at least \$10 to MDA through his or her branch's donation page.

It's easy to create a fundraising page by going to mda.donordrive.com/event/nalc2020 and clicking "create a page." It's that simple. Donations are tracked by branch, with all fundraisers listed on the page.

"Canceling MDA events and camps is disappointing," Davidson said, "but letter carriers are creative, and they don't give up. I look forward to seeing the different ways, including online donor campaigns, that our branches devise to keep resources flowing to MDA in 2020 and to support its vital efforts."

Branches already are busy figuring out ways to make up for canceled MDA fundraisers. Shifting to online donations is helping, and some branches are adapting in other ways.

Rochester, NY Branch 210 is scrambling to make up for a \$10,000 hole in its MDA fundraising goal. The branch holds a golf tournament each May for MDA that usually yields that amount, but it was canceled due to the pandemic, Branch President **Kenny Montgomery** said.

When NALC set up the online donation system and challenged branches to step up, Montgomery and his branch's MDA coordinator, **Jill Morris**, saw an opportunity.

"We thought, 'We'll give it a shot and see what happens,'" Montgomery said. "Within three days, we had \$1,000." At press time, just a few weeks after starting the online donation drive, the branch had raised \$2,700 for MDA.

The online fundraising endeavor has been nearly effortless, he said. "For not doing anything, it's pretty easy," Montgomery said. "We don't have to collect the money. We don't have to deposit the money." There was no event planning or expenses, and the publicity so far has simply involved the branch and individual carriers sharing the fundraiser on social media.

But getting to \$10,000 may require repurposing some of the branch's events, he said. The branch holds another golf tournament each fall, just for fun. Because golf is an outdoor sport that allows for social distancing, and because the virus may have receded by autumn, the branch could hold the fall tournament as scheduled and use it as the MDA fundraiser.

"It's already established. I'm hoping to raise \$4,000 or \$5,000," Montgomery said, "provided everything opens up."

Montgomery also is considering a new way to hold a fill-the-satchel event, something the branch has avoided because it couldn't find a

suitable place. The Rochester Public Market, which hosts farmers and other vendors, has offered a free booth for the branch to solicit donations.

As the pandemic unfolded this spring, **Michele Szafran** turned a setback into an opportunity. "My daughter is a nurse," said the Western Wayne County, MI Branch 2184 MDA coordinator. "She told me about the shortage of masks [for medical staff]." So, Szafran sat at her sewing machine and created several masks for medical workers.

But the cancellation of her branch's annual MDA bowlathon, a competition with nearby Detroit Branch 1 that raised \$5,000 last year, gave her an idea. "When that was canceled, I said we have to do something," Szafran said. She ramped up her mask production, and her "Masks for MDA" fundraiser was born.

At \$8 per mask—\$2 to cover materials and \$6 for MDA—Szafran has sold 200 masks, raising \$1,200 for the charity. She crafts high-quality four-ply masks designed to protect medical staff. She sold many to fellow postal employees but sold additional ones to neighbors and others in her community. By combining the mask sales with the branch's Deliver the Cure online donation challenge, Szafran and her branch hope to make up

for most of the lost revenue from the bowlathon.

Shortly after lockdowns disrupted letter carriers' lives at home but kept them on the job as essential workers, community services director Davidson partnered with Garden Grove, CA Branch 1100 President **Keisha Lewis**; Chicago Branch 11 Vice President **Elise Foster**; and **Larrissa Parde**, Lincoln, NE Branch 8 member and regional workers' compensation assistant. The four carriers reached out to other women in their ranks through social media, including at the "Women of the Satchel" Facebook group, to host a series of virtual ladies' nights using online meeting tools such as Zoom as an MDA benefit.

"It was early April, and everyone was in lockdown mode," Parde said. "We had to do something." The carriers

hosted an online meetup of female letter carriers, with some bringing drinks. The emphasis was on escaping the isolation of lockdown. "We said, 'no COVID talk, no homeschool talk and no work talk.'" "

The first online event was so popular that they held two more. About 40 to 50 participants attended each internet get-together. "It was a good way to get people together and almost feel like we were normal again," Parde said. With a short appeal for support and a link to an online donation page, the events raised a total of \$730 for MDA.

Greeley, CO Branch 324 hopes that, with a few safety measures in place, it can replicate the success of last year's inaugural "This is How We Roll for MDA" car show. At press time, the show was set for Aug. 9.

"We will have hand sanitizer around

and masks available," for the outdoor event, Branch President **Rick Byrne** said. "As of now, the event center is still available and ready for us. We are taking it day by day."

As the country has learned, the COVID-19 pandemic is unpredictable, so Branch 324 leaders are prepared to adapt, either by altering the car show event or scrapping it for another event. "We will be ready to make any changes," Byrne said, "and Branch Vice President **Gaylan Olander** is already thinking of ideas of how to change things up if needed. We are having to get a little creative and think outside the box. We have several ideas as backup plans but are hoping to pull off the full event as planned."

If everything goes as envisioned, the branch's car show will enjoy an advantage. "Almost all of the other car shows in the Northern Colorado area have been canceled," Byrne said, "so many car enthusiasts are hoping we can pull our event off, giving them a location and great venue to show their cars, trucks and hot rods."

The creativity never stops for these NALC branches when trying to Deliver the Cure.

As Davidson put it, "Let's unleash our ingenuity and use the tools we have—including online donations—to be there for MDA, as we have been for nearly 70 years and counting." **PR**

It will be a while before campers can return to an MDA camp like this one in Arizona.

