

MS Society Challenge Walk

A public service activity is often repaid with personal satisfaction.

Mark Richards, K1MGY

The Amateur Radio license affords many opportunities to experiment, learn, and advance the “radio art.” It is also our passport to public service. Many hams participate in this aspect of our hobby by, for example, assisting the Red Cross with vital communications at the Boston Marathon or providing communications support for a community parade. In doing so, we fulfill our charter and become a vital part of our communities. I consider this public service activity to be significant.

The Challenge Walk

Of the many events I’ve participated in as a volunteer, none came close to my remarkable experience at the Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society Challenge Walk on Cape Cod in September 2013. Designed to raise funds for the Multiple Sclerosis Society, increase public awareness, and offer encouragement to MS patients, the event is held over

the span of 3 days and involves 750 participants and 200 volunteers, including scores of Amateur Radio operators. Its 50-mile course traverses public roads and the Cape Cod Rail Trail, and is a challenge to participants and volunteers alike. Amateur Radio communications support is critical for a safe and successful walk, particularly as large sections of the course are isolated. I was one of two bicycle-mobile hams supporting the effort. During the event I

managed to rack up 150 miles, a few sore muscles, and memories to last a lifetime.

Multiple Sclerosis

Multiple Sclerosis is a disease that affects the brain and spinal cord with a wide range of symptoms and impacts. Many people have MS and live without paralysis and pain, while others are walking one day and wheelchair-bound the next. MS patients live with what some call a “ticking time bomb,” because symptoms can manifest quickly and severely. When a dear friend succumbed to MS a few years ago, I witnessed the devastation first hand, and so began my service as a communications volunteer prepared to offer encouragement to those in similar circumstances. Little did I know at the time that the encouragement and inspiration I gave would be returned one hundred fold.

The MS Society consists of a national organization with various state and re-



The bicycle team assembling at Hyannis Green prior to the start of the event.



Jim, KB1JKJ, and Donna Bradley taking a break from sweeping the course on their tandem bicycle equipped with a radio, first aid kit, and other supplies.



Motor Crew members David Odess, KB1MVN (left), and Ross Chapman, KB1MGD.



The author's mountain bike was equipped with a 2 meter APRS transmitter mounted on the frame.

gional chapters. Their primary goal, to achieve “a world free of MS,” is being pursued by funding research for improved MS treatments and, hopefully, a cure. The Society also does a great deal for patients and families through advocacy, information, referral, and events such as the MS Challenge Walk, where those affected by MS gather to support one another.

This event is as demanding in its organizational complexity as it is challenging for participants and volunteers to complete. The MS Society of Greater New England, supported by a team of Amateur Radio volunteers, accomplishes a remarkable feat of planning and operations for this event every year.

I consider safety to be the prime directive in any public service event, more so at the Challenge Walk where 750 participants; some wheelchair-bound, others with leg braces; faced not just a test of stamina, but sudden weather changes, 50 miles of roads and trails with uneven surfaces, busy intersections, and clogged bikeways. Our reflective vests bore the title “Safety Team,” which served to bring all of the volunteers together with this singular focus.

A Geek and His Gear

My assignment turned out to be a real gift; I was the lead support cyclist on each day of the walk. Another ham, Jim

Bradley, KB1JKJ, and his spouse, Donna, followed the last walkers, acting as the course sweepers (volunteers who follow behind the walkers to “sweep up” the last participants and make sure no one is lost along the route). Jim and Donna were on a tandem bicycle equipped with a solidly-mounted mobile rig, APRS, batteries, first aid supplies, water, snacks, and tools — around 400 pounds in total.

My mountain bike was also equipped with 2 meter APRS, enabling me to provide instant and accurate locations to event managers. A rear mast supported GPS and 2 meter antennas; the APRS transmitter was attached to the bike frame. I wore a small backpack, similar to that used by bicycle mes-

sengers, and on its strap I clipped a Yaesu FT-60 (backed up by a Wouxun portable) with a gain antenna. As a backup I also used *APRS Droid*, a mobile phone application that sends GPS position data to the APRS network.

All this was powered by a sealed lead-acid battery. (Note to self: get something lighter

next time!) With a modified Plantronics commercial wired headset (www.plantronics.com/us) in one ear and a mobile phone Bluetooth headset in the other, mine was a geek’s fashion statement. It did prove to be excessive, because the setup required 20 minutes to assemble each morning.

Especially helpful was the use of a moving map display rendered by OpenStreetMap (www.openstreetmap.org), which ran on a spare mobile phone. Mounted in a clear pouch within a handlebar bag, it helped to answer the frequent question, “How far to the next rest stop?” As a backup, I carried a printed map and daily queue sheet that described every point on each day’s route. As the event progressed, I decided to promote the paper from its backup role. It was convenient and enforced the discipline of location awareness. In summary, my setup consisted of 100 pounds of gear, 30 pounds of bike, and 150 pounds of me.

Meeting the Challenges

My participation in the Challenge Walk went far beyond public service communications. Although a technical and logistical exercise, the experience was one of human courage and hope. While each participant raised money for the Society, the whole idea was to walk while pushing through pain and disability.



William Brouillon (left) of the bicycle team assists a participant at the finish who was determined to walk the final distance.



Lori Goode and Marv Winter, part of the motor crew. They were on constant patrol, ready to deal with any issue that might compromise the event.



Celebrating a successful finish are (from left) Brenda Barbour, KB1MVJ (Director of Volunteer Development, MS Society); Kathy Savage, KB1LYJ (medical/ham); Rick Savage, KB1LPW (SAG/ham), and Brittany Collins, KB1ZPS (medical/ham).

On the second day, I had the privilege of accompanying the lead participant along her last 5 miles. Alternating between jogging and walking, she was clearly tired. I offered water and encouragement. Despite being by herself, she took the lead. All of those behind her served as an inspiration.

Included in the plentiful support matrix for participants were SAGs (Amateur Radio-equipped vehicles providing transportation or other assistance), a motorcycle crew, rest stop personnel, ham-equipped emergency medical teams (stationary and mobile), and participant team SAG vans. I must single out the 20-unit bicycle team, mobile phone equipped and coordinated by Alan Loisselle. They were ubiquitous and, along with the crew (motorcycles and SAG vehicles), appeared where they were needed, and at the right time.

Smoothing the Course

A key part of my job was scouting ahead of the lead walker to locate and report safety concerns such as debris along the path or a difficult road crossing. As these issues became apparent, my call to net control brought Marv Winter and Lori Goode of the motor crew to handle them within minutes. Later I learned that each of these issues had been assessed beforehand, and planned for. In the future, I still won't assume something's covered, but will approach issues with the knowledge that the planning is more comprehensive

than I might initially believe. This is a tribute to the extraordinary effort and experience that goes into the extensive event preparation.

At our Net Control Station (NCS) for the 3 days, John Mahon, N1PYN, was the voice that glued everything together. More than offering essential orchestration and coordination, John's every transmission sent a message of confidence to all of us in the field. His relaxed style was imbued with competence. John offered a tireless performance that was inspiring and served up some goals for my own operating.

Support did not end upon our arrival at "base camp" (the Brewster Sea Camps facility). Here the participants and volunteers were provided food, housing, and even a massage for sore muscles — and boy, did I have a few! My assignment required a considerable amount of patrolling, which resulted in average travel of 50 miles a day.

I will remember, and hold with respect in my heart, the special core of Amateur Radio and medical volunteers into whose community I was so graciously welcomed. The bonds that formed are ongoing and leave me very much looking forward to supporting the Challenge Walk again.

An Emphasis on Service

Amateur Radio public service can be far more than talking on the radio. It can be your passport to the life-enriching experi-

ence of serving others. In this event all the technology went to the sidelines. Instead, I discovered the heart of the matter is what you bring in your personal kit, and the welcoming and supportive team of which you become a member. It's waiting to be experienced.

My license allows me this chance to utilize my communication skills and techniques to support others through their challenges. It has opened doors and brought enjoyment and personal fulfillment to my life.

The MS Challenge Walk is one of many events that welcome Amateur Radio and medical volunteers. Visit www.nationalmssociety.org for details or contact me and I'll send you in the proper direction.

Photos courtesy National Multiple Sclerosis Society and Mark Richards.

Mark Richards, K1MGY, an ARRL member, has been a licensed radio amateur since 1968 when the sounds of Morse code beckoned from a neighbor's window. He currently holds a General class license. He works in the solar energy and instrumentation field and is currently involved in ultrasonic flow and heat metering technology. He can be reached at 29 Juniper Rd, Littleton, MA 01460, k1mg@arri.net.

