

## NATIONAL MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS SOCIETY

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## FEATURE STORY

# FIGHTING DIRTY TO END MS



## MUCKFEST MS 5K MUD AND FUN RUN COMES TO ILLINOIS

BY TAREK WILEY


### “LIFE IS TOUGH. THIS IS FUN.”

That’s the motto of MuckFest MS, the National Multiple Sclerosis Society’s newest fundraising event, taking place at 10 locations across the U.S., including the inaugural Chicago area event in Lockport, Ill., on Saturday, Aug. 23.

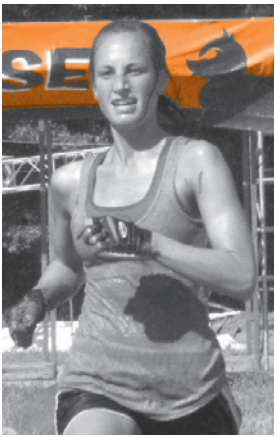
Unlike other mud runs that stress the toughness of their courses, MuckFest MS is all about the fun. The event sends runners of varying athletic ability on a messy, obstacle-packed 5K jaunt designed specifically to cover them in mud and keep them laughing from start to finish.

“MuckFest MS is an awesome opportunity to get dirty and have fun raising awareness for a disease that can be messy at times,” said Angelena Colon, who participated in MuckFest MS in Indianapolis last year.

Angelena, a resident of Antioch, Ill., was diagnosed with MS in May of 2012 after experiencing a numb, tingly sensation throughout her body that affected her ability to walk.



“Being diagnosed with MS can be challenging at times, but embracing the idea of making others aware is inspiring,” said Angelena. “I want to educate others and advocate for those dealing with MS, and MuckFest is a great way to do it.”



Angelen Colon races to the finish line at Muckfest MS Indianapolis.

MuckFest MS participants will run, swing, slosh and climb their way through a muck-filled course that is chock-full of obstacles that even the most novice of athletes will be able to conquer.

“I think that the running or ‘race’ aspects of MuckFest may intimidate some people, but I urge everyone to set those fears aside,” said Jessie LaFree, Chicago resident and previous MuckFest MS Indianapolis participant. “You’re going to feel great, and you’re going to be surrounded by lots of light-hearted, fun-loving people covered in mud and working for a common cause. In the end, everyone has done something great and leaves with an everlasting sense of accomplishment.”

Jessie’s father, Tom, was diagnosed with MS before she was born, so she never knew him without the disease. MS was a fact of life for the LaFrees, but it was one that didn’t define their lives. They never let MS stop them from doing the things they loved, even as Tom’s MS progressed.

“I would say that my experience with MS was as good an experience as it could have possibly been,” said Jessie. “I look back so fondly on my childhood that it’s hard to imagine applying any ‘MS what ifs’ to our situation.”

The LaFrees embody the very spirit of MuckFest MS with their positivity and unwavering dedication to living life to its fullest. It’s a state-of-mind that Jessie grew up with, seeing in her father that life is what you make it.

Tom LaFree passed away in May of 2012, but Jessie and her family continue to honor his memory in all that they do.





Jessie LaFree (back center) and "Team Tom" celebrate finishing the course with a team photo at the finish line at MuckFest MS Indianapolis.

"My dad was a very determined guy, and he was going to do what he wanted to do one way or another," said Jessie. "He didn't let MS stop him."

Angelena can relate. She refuses to let her diagnosis change the way she lives her life and believes that her MuckFest MS experience in many ways mirrors that outlook.

"I conquer the obstacles and mud the same way I am conquering MS: one step at a time," said Angelena. "Each obstacle brings on a different challenge, but all are possible to overcome and move forward from. MS can be messy just like the mud pits, but I am still the same person I have always been."

On its surface MuckFest MS is a hilarious romp through more than 15 outrageous obstacles, but beneath the mud and laughs lies an even greater purpose: 100 percent of the funds raised by participants will directly benefit the National MS Society and its mission to bring an end to MS.

"As a person living with MS, it is truly inspirational

to see so many people come together to support the efforts of the National MS Society," said Angelena. "The entire day was filled with gratitude and support from people I knew as well as complete strangers who cheered me on through every obstacle. I left the event knowing that I wanted to come back again because my heart was touched by the efforts of everyone involved."

On August 23, Angelena and Jessie will once again join their families and friends at MuckFest MS for a truly unforgettable day of fun.

"The entire day was a favorite memory of mine," recalled Angelena. "I enjoyed the excitement before the race, running through the mud pits, laughing as we conquered the obstacles, donating our mud drenched shoes, watching my nephew play in the Lil' Muckers pit, chowing down on some delicious food after the race, and seeing all the people there to support the cause."

The event kicks off at 8 a.m. at the Legacy Paintball & Airsoft Park (2807 Canal St.) in Lockport, with participants entering the course in pre-assigned waves. Participants will be rewarded for their efforts with a free T-shirt, a refreshing beer (or soda) and a tasty snack in the MuckFestival area, where they can relive all the spills and thrills of the day. Even kids can get in on the action in the Lil' Muckers play area.

For more information, or to form a team, register as an individual, or donate online, contact Charlie Blazeovich at **312.423.1144** or at **charles.blazeovich@nmss.org**, or visit **muckfestMS.com**. Participants are encouraged to fundraise to create a world free of MS.

