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World MS Day: One Woman's Fight and Her Efforts to Bring Support to Others

NEWTOWN, Pa., March 18, 2020 – Every day nearly one million Americans—like Christine Cunningham—are fighting hard against challenges, both physically and mentally, caused by multiple sclerosis, also known as MS.

That's more than twice the number previously thought, according to the National MS Society.

MS is an immune-mediated disorder in which the body's immune system mistakenly attacks myelin. This fatty substance protects nerve fiber within the central nervous system, which makes up the brain, spinal cord and visual nerves.

It's a chronic and unpredictable disease with no cure, and symptoms can vary in type and fluctuate in severity, sometimes disappearing entirely or worsening over time.

Approximately 15 years ago, Cunningham was diagnosed with secondary progressive MS, after an MRI scan revealed lesions on her brain and spinal cord.

For her, MS presented as spasticity that causes feelings of stiffness and painful, uncontrollable muscle spasms.

"My first reaction was 'OK, I have MS.' I had no idea what that meant, and just thought at least I know what it is, and I can fight it," said Cunningham.

And fight she does.

In addition to spasticity, Cunningham battles daily fatigue, difficulty walking, numbness and tingling, which she equates the feeling as "pins and needles," weakness, and forgetfulness.

Recently, Cunningham has tried for a spot on a federally-funded stem cell research program and had previously undergone surgery for an intrathecal pump, a medical device that delivers medications directly into her spinal cord.

"My life has turned into medicines, medicine bottles, hospitals, and blood work," she noted. "But, it's important to stay positive. I find a lot of inner strength through my faith and I am grateful for my children and grandchild."

At The Birches at Newtown, where she is a resident, Cunningham channels her inner strength to exercise daily. With the help of on-site therapy services provided by FOX Rehabilitation, she can receive physical and occupational therapies to help relieve symptoms to keep her moving—and more importantly—walking.

"Gym time is crucial to me because with MS, once you lose a function, it's gone," noted Cunningham.

Although focusing on physical health is vital to living well with MS, so is emotional well-being, which sparked an idea.

Cunningham approached the management at The Birches to host a support group at the senior living community. Sanctioned by the National MS Society, the group will meet the last Saturdays of the month from 1-3 p.m.

Topics will range in discussions from how to manage symptoms for incontinence to cognitive changes, coping with the challenges of MS, and other resources to help improve quality of life for those living with the disease and their caregivers.

"You can share what's close to your heart, what you feel you can't tell anybody else," noted Cunningham.

If you're interested in supporting others in their fight against MS, there are several ways to get involved including joining an event like Walk MS® in Newtown on May 3, becoming an MS activist, or donating.

"I don't think there's enough attention given to this disease," declared Cunningham. "MS needs an ice bucket challenge!"

So, who's up for the challenge? For more information on MS and how you can help raise awareness, visit www.nationalmssociety.org.

The Birches, Newtown, PA offers Personal Care and Memory Care in a unique retirement community. Residences are available on an affordable month-to-month lease with no buy-in fees. Resident services include meals, housekeeping, social events and transportation. For more information about The Birches, please call 215-497-7400, or visit www.thebirchesatnewtown.com.

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