

## ROCHELLE RILEY: Diagnosis: MS and activism

BY ROCHELLE RILEY

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When civil rights icon Rosa Parks died, I encouraged people to find their Rosa Parks moments in life -- those points in time where they could take a stand and change the world. Alecia Harris didn't need the advice. She found her moment and mission when she contracted multiple sclerosis.

MS is a chronic disease caused by the body's immune system mistakenly attacking itself. Most MS patients have the relapsing-remitting form that fictional President Josiah Bartlet has on "The West Wing." The rarest, worst kind attacked my mother when she was 25, after the birth of her third child. A wife and teacher living on the Upper West Side of New York, she slowly lost her ability to walk.

Harris was diagnosed in 2001 after the birth of her third child.

"When he was about 7 months old, I started having a problem with numbness and tingling on one side, and my vision started to get pretty dim," said Harris, now 40. "And then it would go away. And then ... I started having headaches. I was really, really tired. I felt like I had postpartum fatigue."

Harris, then a nurse and college instructor, put off a doctor's visit until she lost sight in her right eye. A neurologist needed a single MRI in January 2001 to diagnose MS.

"They normally do other tests, but she said there were enough lesions on my brain for her to know," Harris said.

This is the point where many people would shut down, or focus solely on themselves.

Not Harris. Within six months, she was volunteering for the Michigan chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, attending classes and helping to plan the society's annual fund-raising walk.

Her team, Walking with Faith, became its own fund-raising entity "because in my little mind," she said, "if they have five FDA-approved drugs now, with more money, they can do more."



Alecia Harris

### Walking with faith

Walking With Faith, Inc., which raises funds for multiple sclerosis, has planned (or is participating in) several events in December and throughout 2006. They include:

Noon Saturday. The Walking with Faith Annual Benefit Luncheon. The Fairlane Club, 5000 Fairlane Woods Drive, Dearborn. Tickets: \$50. Keynote speaker: Detroit Free Press Columnist Rochelle Riley on "What Metro Detroit Must Do to Improve its Emotional Health"

Noon Saturday,

Walking with Faith, which is based in Harris' Belleville home, has raised nearly \$30,000. She also is raising a new generation of volunteers. Her sons Robert II, 9; Ryan, 7, and Randall, 5, now plan their own benefit, an annual skating party on St. Patrick's Day.

"I'm teaching them early to give back, to just give of yourself and help others because you just should," she said. "And they're excited about doing it! That's what makes me smile."

Pat McDonald, president of the Michigan chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, said she is moved by all her volunteers, "but Alecia is exceptional. She goes above and beyond."

In four years, Harris has never asked "Why me?"

"I did ask 'Why now?' when I have these three little bods that I'm responsible for... but I never really felt like I was above the storms of life."

Harris treats herself with weekly injections and runs her house on her Social Security income. Her husband left in 2003. But she's undaunted.

"I have hope," she said. "I'm inspired, and I want to do my part to try to make a difference. The joy of the Lord is my strength."

*For information on upcoming Walking with Faith events to raise funds for MS research, visit [www.freep.com](http://www.freep.com) or call 734-397-2041.*

**ROCHELLE RILEY'S** columns are published on the Sunday Voices page and on Wednesdays and Fridays on the Other Voices page. Contact her at 313-223-4473 or [riley@freepress.com](mailto:riley@freepress.com).

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February 25. The Walking With Faith "Tea in the Afternoon," a reception hosted by Ivy Hunter at her gallery, Art of the Diaspora, 30395 Woodward Avenue, Royal Oak. Tickets: \$25

6 p.m. Friday, March 17. The Second Annual Kids' FUN-RAISE for MS Roller Skating Party, Skatin' Station Two, 8611 Ronda Drive, Canton. Admission (which includes skates, but not rollerblades): \$10 (Dress green.)

8 a.m. Saturday, April 22, The Michigan Chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society Annual Walk at Comerica Park. The Walking with Faith Team is accepting volunteers.

5 p.m. Sunday, September 10. The Third Annual Walking With Faith Benefit Dinner. Ford Community and Performing Arts Center, 15801 Michigan Avenue, Dearborn. Tickets: \$75.

For information or to volunteer for any of these events, call Walking with Faith, 734-397-2041.