Nancy Davis masterminded an unprecendented approach to attacking MS via charity.

the prime time of ms. nancy davis

WITH HER CELEB-STUDDED RACE TO ERASE MS, THE QUEEN OF LA PHILANTHROPY MARKS 20 YEARS... AS BOTH HUMANITARIAN AND SURVIVOR. BY ANDREW MYERS

Surveying the Rocky Mountain–punctuated horizon from atop the ski run that winter day in 1991, Nancy Davis—founder of the annual Race to Erase MS gala, which celebrates its 20th edition on May 3, having raised in excess of $30 million for multiple sclerosis research—could easily have passed for the "nice" character in an Aaron Spelling prime-time soap opera.

Blonde, athletic, attractive, with an ever-optimistic personality and a curiosity she's exhibited since childhood, the 33-year-old had three young boys, a billionaire father (the late Marvin Davis, onetime oil magnate, legendary party giver, former owner of 20th Century Fox and The Beverly Hills Hotel, as well as the man said to have inspired Spelling's 1980s phenomenon *Dynasty*), and a mother, Barbara, who was and continues to be a mainstay on the social and civic circuits, not to mention what some might call a philanthropic entrepreneur. "My younger sister had juvenile diabetes, and for the first Carousel Ball [founded by Barbara Davis in 1978], Mom started doing auctions," says Nancy, who has four siblings and was born and reared in Denver but moved to Los Angeles in 1987.

This year Jack Osbourne, who was diagnosed with MS last year, and mother Sharon will be honored with the Medal of Hope Award at the 20th annual Race to Erase MS gala.

Of course, as in any soap opera, there were problems, namely a not-so-happy marriage. But nothing was too off-piste to cloud the general sunniness of the avid skier as she started her downhill run that day above Aspen.

What came next was an accident: a bad fall. Then a doctor to address her injured knee, followed by a second doctor, and a neurologist when Davis lost sensation in three fingertips on her right hand—a numbness that soon spread throughout her body. "Everything dramatically changed in a two-week period," she says. "You can't believe you're sitting in a doctor's office and somebody is pointing at black spots on your X-rays and saying they are lesions on your brain and spinal cord."

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The prognosis was beyond pitiful. There were no drugs, no treatment, no hope or option except a bedridden decline. The doc's sole consolation? "At least you don't have a brain tumor," says Davis, who remembers leaving the office, getting into the elevator, and being overwhelmed by fear of the unknown.

But Davis "isn't good at staying in bed," she says. "I never faked sick to stay home from school even," and she has "never been good at taking no for an answer." Resolved to remain positive, she took action. "I had three kids; I didn't have time to live down to a negative prognosis." Second opinions were sought, then third and fourth opinions. Davis read copiously, traveled coast to coast from one research center to another, and over several months came to understand that, yes, she did irrefutably have MS. More important for the purpose of MS treatment, she discovered that much of the research being

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID MESSLER (DAVIS); ANGELA WEISS/GETTY IMAGES (OSBOURNE)

LEFT: Barbara Davis with Ken Rickel and Nancy Davis, and daughters Isabella and Mariella Rickel at the 19th annual Race to Erase MS gala in May 2012. BELOW: Stevie Wonder (CENTER) and company perform at the benefit.

health to masterminding an unprecedented approach to attacking a disease via charity. A little more than a year after her diagnosis, she launched the Nancy Davis Foundation for Multiple Sclerosis—its primary focus, to facilitate the most cutting-edge and aggressive research into understanding the causes of MS and developing new treatments; its primary means, the Center Without Walls program; its mission, to create and coordinate a network of multidisciplinary scientific programs and experts across the country.

To fund her vision, Davis returned to the family staple: creative philanthropy. In 1993, the same year she established her foundation, she started the Race to Erase MS. What began as a ski weekend in Aspen, raising $1.3 million that inaugural year, has grown into the star-spangled spectacular it is today. "I never want the gala to be that invitation that gets the 'Oh, do I have to go?' response," says Davis, who keeps the agenda—cocktails, live performances, a celebrity fashion show, live and silent auctions, and dinner—fresh through her enormous contact list and the generosity of the celebrities and entertainers therein, who appear gratis (past performers have included Gwen Stefani, Avril Lavigne, Sheryl Crow, Stevie Wonder, and such film and television personalities as David Arquette and Dustin Hoffman).

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"MS wasn't in my job description," says Davis, who interned at the US Supreme Court during college out of the desire to be a criminal attorney. "But the greatest benefit of having MS has been that its cure became my career." As for how successful that career has been thus far: Of the nine drugs addressing MS currently approved by the FDA, Race to Erase MS was involved in seven. And her own battle with MS? "I'm an even more ferocious skier," Davis says, adding that she continues to play tennis and, post-diagnosis, started learning karate. She is now a black belt.

The 20th annual Race to Erase MS: Love to Erase MS takes place May 3 at the Hyatt Regency Century Plaza, 2025 Avenue of the Stars, LA; erasems.org **LAC**

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conducted at these centers was duplicative. "These truly brilliant doctors all thought they were the only ones doing a particular study; none knew they were repeating each other's work!" says Davis, who in 2006 documented her journey with the book *Lean on Me: Ten Powerful Steps to Moving Beyond Your Diagnosis and Taking Back Your Life*.

From that eureka moment, Davis's mission broadened from maintaining her own life and

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Charity Register

OPPORTUNITIES TO GIVE.

20TH ANNIVERSARY EIF REVLON RUN/WALK FOR WOMEN

Who: EIF supports cancer research, delivers diagnostic services, and provides psycho-social and financial support for medically underserved women.

What: The Revlon Run/Walk for Women is geared toward uniting people of all races and ages in the fight against women's cancers.

When: May 11

Where: Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum

Website: *eifoundation.org*

TASTE OF THE NATION LOS ANGELES

Who: Share Our Strength launched the No Kid Hungry campaign, which works to eliminate childhood hunger by connecting children to effective nutrition programs at school and during the summer, and teaches low-income families how to make healthy meals at home.

What: Share Our Strength's Taste of the Nation Los Angeles will showcase the cuisine of more than 50 local chefs. Proceeds support the LA Regional Food Bank and St. Joseph Center.

When: 1–4 PM, Sunday, June 9

Where: Media Park in Culver City

Website: *ce.strength.org*

43RD ANNUAL BEASTLY BALL

Who: The Greater Los Angeles Zoo Association (GLAZA) funds exhibits, capital projects, plant and animal species conservation, and education and community outreach programs at the Los Angeles Zoo.

What: During GLAZA's annual Beastly Ball (Betty White cochaired last year's event), guests are able to spend time in the zoo after hours, where they can experience animal feedings, close-up viewings of small animals, chats with keepers, and auctions.

When: 6 PM, June 15

Where: Los Angeles Zoo

Website: *lazoo.org*