

# TELETHON BACKGROUND

## **Brief History**

The Jerry Lewis MDA Telethon to benefit the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) was inaugurated on Labor Day weekend in 1966. The initial show, broadcast by only one station in New York City, was the first televised fund-raising event of its kind to raise more than \$1 million in pledges.

The Telethon grew steadily, and by 1970 it was carried by 65 stations nationwide. Today, the 21½-hour broadcast, shown on some 200 stations, has become a Labor Day tradition for tens of millions of Americans.

In 1998, the Jerry Lewis MDA Telethon became the first worldwide Telethon, when an Internet simulcast of the national broadcast, hosted by AT&T and RealNetworks, was seen on MDA's Web site at [www.mdaua.org](http://www.mdaua.org). Thanks to CyraCom International, the 1999 Telethon will make television history again with the first live multilingual Webcast, providing real-time Internet programming as streaming video in English, Spanish and Japanese.

Jerry's confidence in the generosity and compassion of the American people is justified, as his annual Telethon since 1966 has continued to set records, raising a record \$51.5 million in pledges and contributions in 1998.

## **Viewership**

The Jerry Lewis MDA Telethon posted a 14% audience share increase in 1998 and remains one of the nation's most watched entertainment programs. Last year's Telethon was watched by some 75 million viewers in the U.S. and Canada and by Internet users from 64 countries around the globe. The MDA Telethon —considered the granddaddy of all Telethons —draws an audience ranking with those of the World Series and the Academy Awards.

No other televised fund-raising event comes close to matching the caliber of the Jerry Lewis MDA Telethon, which consistently achieves a significantly larger rating than any broadcast of its kind.

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### Where Telethon Dollars Go

The Telethon continues to be MDA's single most important fund-raising event. Funds raised during the show help the Association carry on its fight against 40 neuromuscular diseases by supporting basic and applied research, a comprehensive program of medical and support services, and far-reaching professional and public education.

Children and adults with neuromuscular diseases in communities nationwide benefit directly from public support of the Telethon. For example, some 230 MDA-supported clinics offer medical care, physical therapy and flu shots. MDA also sponsors 85 free summer camps for more than 4,000 youngsters with neuromuscular diseases across the country. Support groups for family members, along with assistance with the purchase and repair of wheelchairs and leg braces, are other MDA programs made possible by Telethon-generated donations.

### Why the Dollars Count

MDA's significant impact on the lives of people with neuromuscular diseases has been recognized worldwide. In 1996, the American Medical Association presented Jerry Lewis and MDA with Lifetime Achievement Awards for "significant and lasting contributions to the health and welfare of humanity," and Parents Without Partners Inc. International recognized both Jerry and MDA with 1997 Distinguished Service to Children Awards.

MDA-funded scientists have made dozens of major advances that put treatments or cures for neuromuscular disorders in sight. They've also pioneered significant advances that may lead to therapies for heart disease, cancer, AIDS, Alzheimer's, Huntington's, Parkinson's and cystic fibrosis. Recently, MDA researchers have:

- \* Secured permission from the Food & Drug Administration to proceed with a safety trial of gene therapy for a form of limb-girdle muscular dystrophy—the culmination of several years of effort. MDA grantees are developing techniques that may make gene therapy possible in several genetic neuromuscular diseases.
- \* Assisted with development and testing of potential drug therapies for Lou Gehrig's disease.
- Investigated the potential beneficial effects of creatine in increasing muscle strength in several neuromuscular diseases.
- \* Pinpointed gene defects that cause dozens of specific neuromuscular disorders.
- \* Developed genetic tests for several neuromuscular diseases, including FSH muscular dystrophy and spinal muscular atrophy.
- \* Investigated heart problems in several types of muscular dystrophy, including myotonic dystrophy.
- \* Pursued improved treatments for autoimmune diseases, including myasthenia gravis.
- \* Tested potential new drug therapies for several neuromuscular disorders.

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### **Celebrity Support**

Over the years, countless entertainers, athletes and leaders in business, government and civic affairs have participated in the Jerry Lewis MDA Telethon to show their support of MDA's fight against neuromuscular diseases. Many also take part in other MDA fund-raising events across the country or serve in key MDA volunteer posts.

Among them are Ed McMahon, long-time Telethon anchor and national MDA vice president; actress Ann-Margret, chairperson of MDA's Myasthenia Gravis Division; and singer Maureen McGovern, chairperson of MDA's Polymyositis/Dermatomyositis Division who also serves as an MDA national vice president.

Other luminaries serving as MDA national vice presidents include sports greats Earvin "Magic" Johnson, Brad Johnson and Bart Conner; editor Walter Anderson; entertainers Max Alexander, Jann Carl, Carrot Top, Charo, Cynthia Garrett, Wynton Marsalis and Casey Kasem; International Association of Fire Fighters president Al Whitehead; and renowned heart surgeon Dr. Michael E. DeBakey.

In addition to serving as the Telethon's host and MDA's national chairman, Jerry Lewis has been MDA's number-one volunteer for nearly 50 years.

### **Corporate & Community Involvement**

Many organizations and businesses back MDA's programs of research and services by holding fund-raising events throughout the year. Their representatives join Jerry on the Telethon to let the public know they're taking an active role in the effort to defeat neuromuscular diseases.

The success of both MDA and its Telethon depends on the solid support of a network of some two million volunteers nationwide. Anyone interested in taking part in the fight against muscular dystrophy and related disorders is welcome to join MDA's crusade. For information on how to help MDA as a volunteer or sponsor, call 1-800-572-1717. To learn about MDA on-line, visit MDA's Web site at [www.mdaua.org](http://www.mdaua.org).