

August, 2009

I did it! My personal goal for the Chicago Breast Cancer 3-Day was to complete all 60 miles on foot (or hands and knees). The 3 days were filled with multiple emotions which could change at anytime. I was planning to journal my days each evening, but soon realized that my head on the hard ground became much more appealing than jotting down the day's events. Regardless, I wanted to let you know a bit about my experience; an experience that I was only able to have because of your support. Thank you for your love!

Tawnya (my walking partner) and I had spent several days prior preparing our bags (only 1 each, limited to 35 pounds, including a sleeping bag ©) with not only clothes and toiletries but camp necessities, including tarps, as we would be residing in 6' x 6' tents for the two nights of the event. Rain was, unfortunately, in the forecast so every last sock was enclosed in zipped plastic bags. My packing preparedness was humorous to Scott but the weather predictions held true and I was certainly glad that I had heeded Tawnya's giant-storage-bag advice. We were graciously welcomed at Tawnya's mother-in-law's home Thursday evening as she lives much closer to our starting point (Northbrook Court) than we. We knew that there was no time for staying up late and playing "slumber party" so we immediately headed to bed; but anxiety and excitement got the best of us and sleep was little to be had.

5 AM Friday morning came early but my excitement for what was to come overshadowed the lack of sleep from the night prior. I arrived at Northbrook Court (mall) right on time and was immediately taken aback by the immense amount of volunteers and the precision of their organization. The parking lot had turned into a sort of landing strip and the what-do-I-do-now factor immediately dissipated. Needless to say, my first impression was... impressive.

At the opening ceremony, there were giant lights everywhere that looked like big dots in the sky with motivational sayings, a huge stage straddled with painted 3-Day trailers, curtains and banners, multiple 'why we walk' flags, and the reminders everywhere that we walkers were finally at the culmination of our preparation because we believe that "Everyone Deserves a Lifetime." Of course, there was also a line of blue that would soon become a welcome site at every pit stop... the port-a-potties. National corporate sponsor, Energizer, was on-site handing out foam bunny ears to all walkers so that we would keep going, and going, and going. They were cute but no where to be seen come Day 2 ©

The opening ceremony, of course, produced emotional tears - the first of many to come over the next 3 days. I was overwhelmed with not only the amount of walkers but also the family members and spectators there to see us off. Many people were holding signs with pictures of loved ones that had succumbed to the disease and others with t-shirts stating why they were walking - in honor or memory of their mother, father, sister, aunt, friend, or future generations. Young husbands and children stood wifeless and motherless and cheered in appreciate for the fundraising efforts and our commitment to end breast cancer. "They" say that 1 in 8 women will get breast cancer but seeing the families of those who have it or have since passed because of it puts a different perspective on an otherwise common statistic.

We (~ 1800 walkers) finally parted the mall through cheers and high-fives and started our 60-mile journey at about 7:30 AM. Our first pit stop was at about the 3-mile mark and I was astonished by the amount of walkers already at the medic tent... a testament to training, or lack-there-of, and the physical challenge that would, regardless, be upon us all in the coming days. Each pit stop had tents for food, beverage, and medical, and the line of blue. We were required to eat, drink, and pee at every stop (said in a chant... for No IV!). I was

pleasantly surprised on how 'easy' the walk was, given that we had stops or cheering stations between every 2 to 4 miles. They broke down the big goal into sizeable bites and it became much easier to swallow. Each stop had its own theme and the crew was incredible with excitement for every walker.

Our first day's mileage was about 22 and took us to Oakton Community College where we would camp for the next two nights on their expansive lawns. The weather that day started out overcast and cool but by lunch-time had turned into a steady rain. We were all soaked, and regardless of the continuous applause and cheering along the way, were cold and miserable when we finally made it to our home away from home. Tawnya and I were walkers 1266 and 1267 when we, teary-eyed from satisfaction, entered camp a little after 4 PM. We were required to eat dinner upon arrival prior to anything else, so we did... spaghetti and meatballs, salad, garlic bread, mixed vegetables and chocolate brownie were fabulous and they even had Diet Coke to wash it all down - a welcomed gift after a day full of water and Gatorade ©

Camp was... an experience. The common grounds were set-up beautifully with the same kind of decoration as the opening ceremony. There were vendor tents for shopping, tents for massages, and even technology tents for walkers to check e-mail and the like (I did not). We had to set up our tents in our designated spot but we, thankfully, had the Oakton College Soccer Team as Tent Angels. T and I were about to fret as the coach called the team together and thanked them for fulfilling their volunteering commitment of time from 2 until 6 and released them; but every one of them stayed to continue helping when they were told there were still walkers coming in that would need assistance. This was just one of many experiences of kindness that we were privy to throughout the weekend. The guys grabbed our bags from us, grabbed a hot pink tent, took us to our spot, and had our residence established in a matter of moments. Oh - I forgot to mention, yes, it was still pouring down rain. Not fun. Tawnya and I decided that getting settled Friday night was the worst part of Day 1 - 22 miles was nothing. One saving grace was that magnificent hot showers that were available to us via the mobile shower trailers. We were finally able to get warmed up before walking gingerly back to our tent. It was only about 8:30 PM but my (Michael's) Toy Story sleeping bag never looked so good. Amongst continuing entertainment and excitement happening at the main tent, Tawnya and I fell into a deep sleep for the night. Or at least, that's what we thought... I awoke to thunder and wind at 2 AM Saturday morning with the fear that our tent was going to blow away with us it! I fell back asleep, praying that when I would wake for the day, it would have stopped raining.

The Good Lord knows better than I and it was still raining at 6 AM when our alarm sounded to start the day. We moved very slowly getting dressed, hoping that the rain would diminish by the time we actually exited our tent. It did not. After much internal debating on hiding out at camp for the day, we were off for our rainy start Day 2. It eventually stopped raining in the late morning but, regardless, our spirits were high because of the amazing community experienced that day. We walked through some beautiful, multi-million dollar home neighborhoods that had incredible landscaping but even better, the city of Mt. Prospect - just another suburb to some, but to us walkers, a sort-of Oz. You couldn't go more than a street without having another family sitting outside cheering you on. There were pink decorations on many of the houses and people handing out candy, popsicles, water, and ice. Groups held up signs of thanks and shouted words of encouragement and appreciation. Sidewalks were covered with chalk writings and several cheerleading teams were chanting for us as we walked through their poms. The policemen that assisted with traffic crossing were all wearing pink-shirted uniforms and they had converted their cars to have pink hoods with graphics supporting Finding a Cure. Not only did they monitor the street crossings, but also drove our route with encouraging honks and waves. We were also greeted by the Mt. Prospect fire department, wearing hot pink department t-shirts, their trucks a backdrop, handing out popsicles and cheering us as their heroes. Wow!

Tawnya and I began to feel the adding miles throughout Day 2.1 had begun blistering in multiple spots on both feet despite my best efforts in keeping my feet dry and the heat and humidity that followed the morning was wearing on Tawnya. Still we pressed on... slowly but surely. With 3.5 miles left in the day, my blisters required the attention of the medical team. After reviewing my tootsies, I was asked by a medic if I was "hell bent on finishing the day walking." Um - YES! I wasn't going to let a few blisters keep me from my personal goal of every mile walked. The doctor did a little work and said it was the best she could do and sent me on my way. Every step felt like I was walking on razor blades but I kept remembering my personal doctor telling me. "Your body is going to hurt. But it can do it. It's strong. The only thing that will stop you is here ::pointing to head:: ." So I pressed on with continued encouragement from signs posted such as "Every step closer to a cure" and "Every 2 1/2 minutes is another reason to walk."

Day 2 ended much drier than Day 1 but while we were walking, our tent had, indeed, blown away with all our belongings. At least that was our deductive reasoning as to why we returned with our covering tarp wrapped and tied next to our tent (thank you Tent Angel), and our belongings in a pile within the tent, damp from rain. Grrr... Tawnya and I were in the 1300 walker range when we returned that night but also learned that about 120 walkers dropped out from Day 1 to Day 2.1 wondered how many were actually going to be walking come Day 3...

Tawnya had set our alarm to wake us at 6AM on Sunday, Day 3, but camp rustling woke us closer to 5. To our surprise, over half of the tents were already down and walkers were already on their way. We were definitely newbies. Following others' lead, we started packing up and looking forward to the culminating third day, sense of accomplishment, and Closing Ceremonies to come at Soldier Field. Day 3 would take us from the City of Lincolnwood (we were bussed there from the College) to the east coast of the state where we would finish our day's walk down miles and miles of the Chicago Lakefront.

Throughout each day, the safety crew would post signs stating the intensity of the heat. Friday's cool (low 70s) and rain was labeled Moderate; Saturday's signs went from Moderate in the morning to High in the afternoon to Hazardous in the late afternoon; Sunday started Hazardous - it was the first day of the summer with a heat index over 100 degrees... 105 to be exact. I was thankful for my love of heat and humidity amongst other's disgust, specifically Tawnya. She became a wilting flower and with 5 miles left to go in the day, told me to continue on without her. Tawnya's walking goal was the same as mine - walking every last mile, no matter what. I didn't want to leave her but each stop has a specified closing time and if you are still there when it closes, you are "swept" via van to a future stop. Not wanting to risk being swept, I told Tawnya that I would continue on and wait for her until the last possible moment at the next stop before going on to the finish line without her. When I arrived at the last stop prior to the finish, I ate a snack, changed my socks, refilled my water bottle, stopped at the blue line, and contemplated how crappy I felt leaving T behind. BUT then I got a text from her that she had arrived - I looked up, and there she was! She had walked, without a doubt, the hottest stretch of the walk (on the Lakefront, next to Lake Shore Drive, with hot cars' idling-in-traffic-engines separated from you by only a cement barricade) with others by her side. Even I admitted it was hot through those miles... I was so proud of her! Through Day 2 and Day 3 I was overhearing conversations about people being swept, by choice, throughout the journey. My interest peaked, I learned that it was indeed a rarity to complete all 60 miles by foot and became more impressed by Tawnya and mine's efforts to meet our goal of every mile walked.

So together, dodging crazy bicyclists, runners, dogs, and beachgoers on our last stretch of our 60-mile journey, Tawnya and I made our way to Soldier Field. We walked through the concessions area of the stadium, following the cheers that we could hear in the distance. I had already begun getting teary-eyed but when we came around the last corner and saw the huge aisle of spectators, fellow walkers, crew, and family, the floodgates of tears opened. Tears of accomplishment and satisfaction were mixed with the emotion of the purpose for even the need to participate in such an event as this. T and I walked slowly (out of necessity) and gave high fives and knuckle bumps to those with their hands out and both laughed when, at the end of the receiving line, we spotted the Mt. Prospect Police Chief and another officer, in their pink uniforms, waiting to congratulate us. We did it!

After receiving our victory t-shirt and rose, T and I waited (not long) for the last walker to come in and for the Closing Ceremony to begin. The crowd awaited us on the south side of the lawn at Soldier Field. As at the Opening Ceremony, the huge stage and banners and flags were displayed and we walkers made our way through the crowd-lined Victory Walk. Participants that were themselves breast cancer survivors were distinguished from the main group and, when they walked their Victory Walk, fellow walkers raised a shoe to them. The all volunteer crew of 425 individuals was also honored; they truly made the difference in making the event one to remember. I would much rather walk 60-miles than work as hard as they did over the prior 3 days. They were simply amazing.

The Closing Ceremony continued on and we learned that together we, the Chicago Breast Cancer 3-Day, had raised OVER 5 MILLION DOLLARS for the Susan G. Komen for the Cure Foundation. WOW! A few, okay -8 screaming blisters, aching feet, vasodilation in the legs, wet, cold, wind, and heat wouldn't stop me from doing this again.

So, with that friend, I would love your support again next year when Tawnya and I (and maybe even you) start pounding the pavement in search of a cure.

Because Everyone Deserves A Lifetime.

With love.

