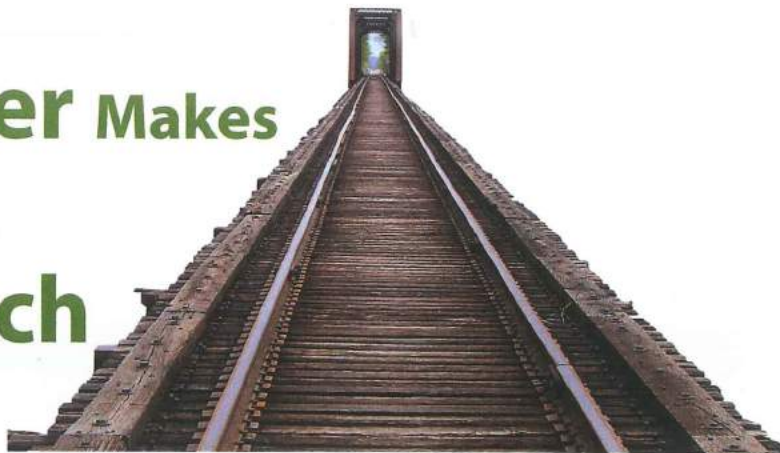


Wisconsin Walker Makes Strides for Cancer Research

by abby debruine



The fire spread quickly at Fort Hunter Liggett, just south of Big Sur. The 200-foot flames had ignited from a combination of a particularly dry California day and soldiers' practice rounds on the military base. Ron Reschke had come in with a team of fellow firefighters to extinguish the hell-wall of fire, but looking around him and seeing only the smoke-outlined silhouettes of his crew, Reschke realized he was alone.

Reschke moved from Madison to California at 17. A rebellious teenager who had perhaps become even more so since his father's death, Reschke was in need of some direction. That direction pointed toward Big Sur and manifested itself in the form of Kelly Collins, a Vietnam vet with little patience for the unruly.

"I came into the fire service as green as they come," Reschke says. "Kelly was a hard-nose of a boss and was known for not getting along with everybody. But he must have seen something in me because he took me under his wing and straightened me up."

Reschke and Collins' boss-employee relationship eventually grew into a friendship, which sometimes involved not-so-friendly poker games some nights after work.

"If you were invited to play cards with him, then you knew he must not hate you all that much," Reschke recalls with a smile. "But he definitely still insisted that you 'pay for your lessons.'"

After three years of working together, Col-

lins began showing signs of illness. Missing work for three days at a time, Collins would often come back with a splotchy, red face and a reserved attitude. Post-work card games dwindled and were replaced with Collins' solitary sessions with an old Nintendo.

Collins later told his co-workers he had been diagnosed with skin cancer. But Reschke wasn't buying it.

"There was more going on than he was letting on," he says. "But it was an issue of respect that we didn't question him."

Reschke's suspicions were confirmed a year-and-a-half later. He had been working with a different crew since transferring to Washington to pursue a promotion and a degree in diesel hydraulics from Bellingham Technical College. Though he had been keeping in touch with Collins, it was another fellow firefighter who told Reschke that Collins never had skin cancer to begin with—he'd been undergoing chemotherapy for stomach cancer the entire time.

Shortly after Reschke moved back to Madison in 2001 and began working at the UW-Madison Hospital and Clinics transportation department, he received news that his mentor and friend had passed away.

In a sense, Reschke was alone once again.

Cancer does not discriminate. It attacks people of every age, gender and race and has surpassed heart disease as the number one killer of Americans under 85. In Reschke's opinion, it would be easier to find a haystack in a forest fire than to find a person whose life has not been affected by cancer. Although many people diagnosed with cancer have a support system of family and friends to help see them through to the road of hopeful recovery, fighting the disease into remission is ultimately a solitary journey. And Reschke wanted to embark on a journey of his own—a jour-

ney not only to raise money for cancer research, but also to raise awareness.

Adopting the mantra of "I may not be rich or have a medical degree, but I care about people and can walk," Reschke's "Walk to Heal" journey covered more than 1,200 miles and took almost three months to complete. All the money he raised would go directly to the UW-Madison Comprehensive Cancer Center, Wisconsin's only comprehensive cancer center. Reschke specifically requested the money go toward the center's new Interdisciplinary Research Complex.

"The walk was my way of saying goodbye to Kelly," he recalls. "He taught me things that I don't think I would have learned from anyone else. He taught me about work ethics and about being a good person at the same time. I don't think I'd be the person I am if I'd never met him."

For a year-and-a-half, Reschke planned, organized and trained for the walk. He ran at least 10 miles a day and spent his weekends riding his bike around Lake Mendota. Hours after work, Reschke would bike around town, visiting various businesses to get sponsorships. He came up with a budget and mapped out his journey down to the amount of dried fruit and nuts he put in baggies to be staged in the 11 boxes he positioned at various stopping points along his route across the state. After Reschke drafted a purpose of intent detailing the walk, he approached his immediate supervisor, Terry Frink, about applying for a 12-week leave of absence from his job as a courier at the hospital.

"It takes a lot of guts to undertake something like that," Frink says. "I didn't hesitate for a moment in approving it. If someone is going to make that big of a commitment, I could never stand in his way."

At 6:30 a.m. April 29, 2005, Reschke departed from the UW-Madison Comprehensive Cancer Center to begin his journey.

PHOTO BY RON RESCHKE

PHOTO BY RON RESCHKE



Reschke (left) and his friend Brandon (right), whose mother died of cancer, pose in front of The Shoe Box in Black Earth. Brandon walked six miles with Reschke, from Cross Plains to Black Earth.

Attached to one of the zippers of his 45-pound pack were 17 multicolored bracelets representing various forms of cancer.

Though Reschke had the company of the occasional co-walker throughout the trip, his rigorous schedule of 30 miles a day often left the once-zealous walkers in his dusty wake.

"I set up the walk to be difficult so people would pledge," Reschke says of his grueling schedule. "People with cancer have an even tougher road to travel. This walk was not a camping trip. It was my job for almost three months."

Walking on county highways and state trails, Reschke often didn't know where he'd spend his nights. There'd be many times when a spent Reschke would have no other choice than to camp where his feet gave out beneath him.

"I slept on construction sites, on baseball fields, you name it," he remembers. "But there were a lot of times, especially in the small towns, where people that I met along the way insisted I stay with them for the night."

Word of Reschke's journey traveled quickly, even to the most obscure Wisconsin towns, causing something of a Forrest Gump-like following.

Ron Reschke was Forrest Gump with a purpose.

In the middle of the fourth leg of his trip, Reschke met up with a deer about 22 miles south of Ashland. The deer began to walk with him, following him from behind at first, eventually working up the nerve to

walk in stride with Reschke. Cars driving by began to slow down for the photo-op that lasted for more than 12 miles. Concerned with the fact that the road was windy and traffic had started to back up, Reschke called the local sheriff's department for assistance.

"It takes a lot of guts to undertake something like that ... If someone is going to make that big of a commitment, I could never stand in his way."

Reschke explained the situation to an amused operator, and shortly after an officer arrived. The officer thanked him for the call and told him how wonderful he thought the walk was. He escorted Reschke and the deer a half-mile up the gravel road and told him from then on, he was on his own.

Reschke was alone once again.

On July 22, Reschke returned to Madison, 15 pounds lighter, his charity of choice—the UW-Madison Comprehensive Cancer Center—\$8,500 richer.

Reschke had hoped to raise much more, but Ann Johnson, fundraising and special events manager for the cancer center, says his walk was extremely successful.

"For a one-man event, it's an incredible number. We've had other events that a dozen people organized and don't raise nearly that much," Johnson says. "But even more successful was Ron's ability to increase cancer visibility and awareness. And that can't be measured in dollars."

Reschke has plans for a national Walk to Heal campaign slated for 2007 but says he'll be delaying it for another year-and-a-half. Shortly after he returned from his 1,200-mile trip, he applied for a promotion to maintenance mechanic at the hospital and was eventually awarded the job.

Reschke doesn't want to jeopardize his new position.

"Everybody's got a career and I don't want people to feel that I'm utilizing the system to get time off," he says.

But sometimes he wonders whether doing the walk gave him an edge over other applicants.

"I guess what I did could be counted as volunteer work, which can be put on a resume," Reschke says. "And these days, in the professional world, every little bit helps."

Reschke hasn't had a chance to finish writing his thank-you notes to all the people who donated to his cause. He hopes they still remember him—not for what he was doing, but what he was doing it for.

"Wisconsin's doing something about cancer research. To come out of the woods after living there for 11 years to work at the hospital was an eye-opening experience," Reschke says. "Chemotherapy has come a long way and with all the new technology available, you have to keep up on the progress they're doing, you can't stop."

"What I did was a sacrifice. I had to sacrifice a year-and-a-half of planning, no pay. But anyone could have done it if they really wanted to," he says humbly.

What Reschke doesn't realize is, not anyone could have done it. In a 60-hour work-week world, it's difficult to find time for oneself, much less the community. But Reschke feels that whatever amount a person can give, be it a lunch hour or a three-month journey, it will always be time well spent.

By the time construction crews break ground in August for the hospital's new In-

“But even more successful was Ron’s ability to increase cancer visibility and awareness.

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terdisciplinary Research Complex, Reschke will have begun making tentative plans for his national cancer walk. Hopefully, when Walk to Heal America begins, it will be one man’s journey he doesn’t have to walk alone. Just don’t try to keep up with him. Reschke walks at a fast clip—almost like he’s being chased by fire. <<

To see a map of Ron Reschke’s route, visit www.curbonline.org.

> Are you at risk?

According to the American Cancer Society (ACS), about 76 percent of all cancers are diagnosed in people 55 and older, but anyone can develop cancer. As rates of new cases and deaths rise each year, many people are beginning to wonder: What are my chances of developing cancer?

Researchers use the term “lifetime risk” to refer to the probability a person will develop or die from cancer during the course of his or her lifetime. In the United States, men have slightly less than a 1 in 2 lifetime risk of developing cancer; a woman’s lifetime risk is slightly more than 1 in 3.

“Relative risk” is the measure of the strength of the relationship between risk factors and a specific cancer. It compares the probability of developing cancer in people with a certain trait to the probability in people who do not have such a trait. Male smokers, for example, are almost 20 times more likely to

develop lung cancer than non-smoking males; therefore, their relative risk is 20. Women who have had either a mother, sister or daughter develop breast cancer (a “first-degree” family history) have almost twice the risk of developing breast cancer compared to women who do not have such a family history.

Some cancers can be prevented, however. The ACS says all cancers caused by cigarette smoking and heavy alcohol use can be prevented completely. Evidence also suggests that almost one-third of the 570,280 cancer deaths expected to occur in 2005 will be related to nutrition, physical inactivity and obesity, and therefore, could also be prevented.

Alarming, almost half of all new cancer cases in the United States could have been detected earlier by screening.

The ACS recommends getting at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity five days a week along with eating five or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day (consumption protects against several cancers, including mouth, esophagus, lung, stomach and colon) to decrease a person’s overall lifetime risk.

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“For a lot of children here, the University of Wisconsin-Madison seems terribly far away and out of reach. In April, during Badger Alumni Day in Green Bay, however, the kids saw that it *is* real; it *is* a place.

They started to say, ‘Maybe someday, I could go to school there.’ I want to keep that hope alive. That’s why I’m taking a stand for Wisconsin.”

— Kathy Costello '71, MS'77
Principal, Annie Jackson Elementary School
Green Bay, Wisconsin



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