

To keep my sanity in 2004 while working full-time and finishing grad school full-time, I would come home from work and go for a walk before hitting the books. I think I was doing 3-4 miles about five days a week, but I wasn't really keeping track. After grad school was complete, I did a lot of hiking on the weekends. Hiking was something I'd loved for years. On one adventure, my parents travelled about 8 hours one-way with me, so I could hike some trails I'd read about. My dad said, "You sure drive a long way just to walk." That still makes me laugh - a wonderful memory. All because of a walk.

I had no clue about proper training back then. I injured my already persnickety feet and ended up spending two winters in a walking cast or on crutches. That put a little damper on walking.

In 2008, I started dating a fella who is an exercise physiologist and a musician on the side. Little did I know how my life would change with Kim! He had met and become friends with Pete Huttlinger, a fingerstyle guitar player who played for John Denver the last four years of John's life. Pete and his wife, Erin, would come to Wheeling, West Virginia, to play at Kim's home concerts. Pete and Erin rubbed elbows with the music world's top names, but they never acted like it. They were always fun, loved to tease, and folks were drawn to them. They would help anyone.

In 2010, because of a congenital heart defect, Pete had a massive stroke - he had to learn to play the guitar again. In 2011, he went into major heart failure. They life-flighted him from a hospital in Nashville to a hospital in Texas where he was given a Ventricular Assisted Device. After months in Texas, he was well enough to return home to Nashville. After getting permission from his doctor, he signed up to walk the Nashville Half-Marathon one year to the day from his life-flight. He put an announcement on his Facebook page for people to join him in the walk. If folks couldn't get to Nashville, they could walk where they were.

Fourteen of us gathered on a cold wet spring day in Wheeling to walk 13.1 miles to show our support to Pete. I must have trained for it, although I have no memory of it. Kim would not have let me do it without training! Since I never logged miles in the early years, I'm guessing that was the furthest I'd walked to that point. That was 2012, and I was hooked. All because of a walk.

Since I was now hooked and had someone to tell me how to properly train, I started setting new goals. We hiked the Grand Canyon in 2013. I walked some half-marathon races. In 2014, my friend Mary Ann and I set our eyes on a 50k one-day hike (that's 31 miles). When we finished that day, Kim said, "I parked across the street." We looked at him, and I said, "So? We aren't walking that far." He had to be the valet and bring the car to us. All because of a walk.

As I was training for that 50k, I remember talking to my dad. He had been fighting diabetes for close to 30 years. It seemed like just when he worked up to something physically, he'd have a setback. I told him I'd make a deal - he would work up to walking a mile while I was training for my hike. Trust me, with no feeling in his feet and painful neuropathy, I had the easier part of that challenge. He didn't go for it. I can't say that I blame him. After so many years of fighting, I can't imagine how frustrated he was.

My dad passed away on Mother's Day 2015. I had been helping my mom care for him the last few months. Out of the blue, I developed double vision. I was no longer allowed to drive, but I was the one responsible for giving him IVs each day. My two dogs and I moved in with Mom and Dad, so I could give the IVs. I was then actually closer to my work, so I would get rides to and from work from their house.

For two months while I was at Mom and Dad's, I had neighbors checking on my house, mowing my acre, doing maintenance on my tractor - all without being asked. I'd receive a text saying, "Just drove by your house. Somebody has already mowed." For two months, I never had to think about those responsibilities. When I returned home after my dad passed and my vision returned to normal, I learned that two of my neighbors had been diagnosed with diabetes. That was dreadful news.

I know what my dad went through with that disease. I'd watched him try to walk the last few years. He'd get a little ways and need to rest, but he was stuck. I watched him rest on a fire hydrant or I'd follow with a kitchen chair. He would quickly get discouraged.

My dad didn't want a funeral. We didn't have visiting hours. I was trying to decide if I was going to plant a tree in my yard for him or what I was going to do. I decided to put a bench down by the road in his memory that would also help others. I put "Walkers' Rest Stop" on it.

That was nice, but one bench really didn't do much. I wanted to put several benches in a loop, so people who had been sedentary or healing from surgery could gradually increase their distance. They could walk and stop to rest if they needed to before continuing. I started looking for grants. I found one. I took the grant info and the idea to Polly Loy at The Ohio State Extension Office in Belmont County and told her I needed her help. She didn't hesitate. She expanded on the bench idea. Within a couple weeks, we had our first grant application submitted.

After we submitted the first two grant applications, Pete and Erin Huttlinger, were in Wheeling for a visit and to play another one of Kim's house concerts. I told Erin about the grant application and our walking project idea. She was so excited for us and told me to keep them posted.

January 7, 2016, I received a text from Polly that one of our applications was accepted. On our third attempt, we had received funding for Belmont Walks from the Smith-Goshen-Rice Enrichment Fund through the Community Foundation of the Ohio Valley. Polly and I agreed to meet the very next Thursday to go over details. I decided to wait until after that meeting to email Pete and Erin. Sadly, the morning after that meeting, I received a text that Pete had another stroke. He was not going to make it. Pete passed January 15, 2016. Just as we received a grant to help others start their journey of walking, we lost the man who was responsible for my journey. After Belmont Walks made the newspaper, I sent the article to Erin, so she would know Pete's far-reaching influence. All because of a walk.

May 1, 2016 was the start of Belmont Walks. Ten benches were made by the local prison - our grant paid for the wood, they provided the labor. Families agreed to allow us to put the benches in their yards by the road. We painted stencils on the road about every 100 feet, so people would know where the loop of benches was. Sixty-eight people in a small village of 450 people signed up for the walking program. May 4 was our first group walk. It was cold and rainy, much like that first walk in 2012. Twenty-seven brave souls ventured out in that miserable weather to walk together. They are fighting pains from double hip replacements, double knee replacement, fibromyalgia, abdominal surgeries, hernia surgeries - you name it. And they smiled the whole time! All because of a walk.

Just under a month is left of the formal walking program. I hope people are becoming hooked on walking and they continue after the program. I hope walking changes their lives. Walking is a way they can challenge themselves. It can keep them fit, keep them healthy. It can be a social event. It can be a stress-reliever. It's a way to grieve, a way to heal. Walking is powerful medicine.

As for me, I have a few more races planned for the year, so my walking journey continues...