

A Heart for Walking

by Judi Hasson

On a warm autumn morning last October, Beth Hagan laced up her sneakers and began walking to raise money and awareness

for multiple sclerosis. Hagan, 46, of Havertown, Pa., who was diagnosed with MS seven years ago, had pledged to complete her sixth Challenge Walk MS event.

Walking 50 miles is a challenge for almost anyone. Beth Hagan does it using a cane, five pairs of sneakers and a huge heart.

On October 11, not far from Philadelphia, she joined 300 other walkers, including 65 people who also have MS, for what has become an annual event for the Society's Greater Delaware Valley Chapter. This Challenge Walk raised some \$600,000 for MS research and services.

While the chapter's official Challenge Walk is 30 miles over two days, Hagan's own milestone for success is 50 miles in three days. And she has the proof of her effort. This year, she wore through five pairs of sneakers.

Using the capacity she has

"When I finish, it's an amazing feeling. I feel so much support from the people who do the Challenge and the people who are



running it. I cry every time when I'm done," said Hagan, who is the director of client services for ActionAIDS, a non-profit organization in Philadelphia that works with HIV/AIDS clients.

"I have always been pretty driven," she said. "I'm more afraid of not being able to do it. I don't want to waste any time. I need to use the capacity I have."

Determined to keep moving

In an interview the night before her walk began, Hagan was "kind of anxious" about the heat and humidity.

"The humidity is a big factor for me. If it's humid, it just drains me. I get dehydrated. I drink a lot of fluids."

But Hagan had been preparing for the Challenge Walk for a long time. She had always been an athlete, and she was determined to keep moving after being diagnosed at age 39. She takes a disease modifier, anti-spasticity medication via an implanted pump, and a daily medication for fatigue.

Joyce Walks

Society President and CEO Joyce Nelson will be walking in Challenge Walks all over the country this year. See "On My Mind," page 78.

The Challenge Walk takes place in more than 10 locations across the country from May to October.

Walking is part of her daily workout. She tries to walk two to three miles a day and aims for 10 miles on the weekends. She uses a treadmill at home in bad weather. And she keeps moving despite the fact that her legs are always stiff and she walks like a "tin man."

"Psychologically, it makes me feel better to walk," she said.

Inspiring others to move

Her determination heartens those around her, including her team of a dozen friends and family members who do the Challenge Walk with her.

"She is a total inspiration to me. I want to give her as much support as I can," said her cousin, Lisa Fay, 36, a team member from Newtown Square, Penn.

"If anything, Beth helps the other people on our team. She is usually the first one of us across the



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finish line,” said Pat Fitzgerald, another teammate and a co-worker.

A day-by-day challenge

Hagan has some strategies to handle the Challenge Walk. She wears a camelback water bottle on her back that holds 67 ounces, and she goes through several bottles a day. She has honed a special walking style as MS prevents her from picking up her feet. With help from her cane, she drags them to keep moving. “When I get going, I can do 3½ miles an hour,” she explained.

Day One went like this: for breakfast, Hagan downed a bagel with peanut butter before stretching for 10 minutes. She then started her challenge by doing 10 miles on her treadmill. Then she took a 10-mile walk to Havertown with a few of her teammates.

On Day Two, the official start of the Greater Delaware Valley Challenge Walk MS, she started at 6 a.m. and finished at 1 p.m. Using her cane, she headed purposefully down a course that included plenty of hills. Every 1½ miles, volunteers offered water and food and cheered the walkers on. That afternoon, Hagan hit the bed at a hotel for a nap before heading to an evening celebration where walkers, teammates and volunteers held lit candles to celebrate the halfway mark. Many spoke about why they walked.

“It was so moving,” Hagan remembered.

On Day Three, the route was even hillier, and the event did not start until 9:30 a.m., late by Hagan’s timetable. She grew nervous, but she told **Momentum** she had something important to rely on.



“The camaraderie, support and wonderful people you meet—it’s an experience like more than anything you can imagine,” she said.

John Scott, president of the Society’s Greater Delaware Valley Chapter, said the Challenge Walk served as a yearly renewal for people who support the Society and its fundraising efforts.

“Everybody helps each other along. It’s like family from the moment people start. They’re on a journey together,” Scott said.

Walking without prejudice

Hagan knows how often MS is misunderstood by the public. Training at a local track, people sometimes look at her and make comments about the noise she makes dragging her feet.

“I have people telling me that I shouldn’t drink. I look drunk when I walk,” Hagan said. “I feel self-conscious. Sometimes I feel ashamed.” But on the Challenge Walk, she is surrounded by people who understand.

At the finish line, Beth was sore but undaunted. “My feet were bothering me quite a bit. My legs, too, and my back because of the water pack,” she admitted. She took the next day off from work. But first she signed up for the 2009 Challenge Walk this coming October. It will be her seventh. ■

Judi Hasson is a Washington, DC–based journalist, who was diagnosed with MS in 2007.