

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

By Mike Skinner

The Event: The Second Annual WALK FOR HUNGER, to raise money for PROJECT BREAD.

The Location: Shirley Medium Prison, Shirley, Massachusetts.

The Mission: To push my friend Joe Labriola in his wheelchair for twenty miles and set the record for the farthest distance ever done inside a Massachusetts State Prison.

The Challenges: To do it on a small, old beat up, dirt track that is riddled with ruts and pot holes and in dire need of repairs.

To do it with an old relic of a wheelchair that is also in need of some repairs.

To do it within the five hours allotted for time in the yard by the prison administration (two in the morning, three in the afternoon) while ducking and dodging the other walkers and runners on such a small, semi-oval track. Three laps around is a mile.

If Joe and I could complete sixty laps, then the record would be ours, and a lot of money would be raised as well for a very worthy cause.

Aside from the challenges I listed above, I had something else to take into consideration, and that was Joe's health and well being during this potential five hour bumpy and bouncy ride and the toll that it would take on his body, both inside and out. Joe suffers from severe C.O.P.D., so I am always vigilant when it comes to his breathing, and would'nt want anything to trigger a coughing fit. He also has an arthritic spine, and is absolutely going to feel every bump and rut we may hit. I thought about the number it would do on his kidneys, and started to have second thoughts as to whether or not this was worth it.

I shared my concerns with Joe. Know what he did?

He laughed out loud, and dismissed the topic from further discussion. Just like I knew he would. Truth be told, he was more concerned about his wheelchair surviving our little excursion than himself. For as long as I've known him, that's how Joe is; A true Warrior.

A Marine through and through. His body may be slowly giving out on him, but not his heart, nor his mind, which is as sharp as it ever was in the twenty-eight years that I've been privileged to know the man.

Here's a guy who did two tours in Vietnam, and then goes to prison for forty years. That's Forty with a capital "F". And yet, he's still going strong, fighting the good fight, on all fronts.

When there is a storm with a gale force wind, there are men, who refuse to batten down, refuse to surcome to the force of the storm and who stand against it and weather and endure it until it calms itself into serenity.

Such a man is Joe Labriola, and by pushing him around that track for twenty miles to set the record is my way of honoring him, because in my heart of hearts, I know he'd do it for me. Just like my parents would have. My love for them would further inspire me to get this done, as they smile down from the Heavens. This was for them too.

The fact of the matter is this: A statement of love means nothing without action to back it up. I had talked the talk, now it was time to walk the walk. Literally.

Joe and I did some prep work the night before the event. We carbed up on homemade pasta salad. Oiled up the ole wheelchair and made sure our walkman radios had new batteries. Joe keeps a laundry bag attached to the back of his chair. I put an energy drink in it for the morning part, and made some green tea drinks for the afternoon. We were as ready as we'd ever be.

Early Sunday morning, Joe and I went to breakfast in the chow hall, it was the usual stale coffee cake and gray lumpy stuff. But we didn't go there to eat, we were there to meet up with some of the other men whom were both participating in the Walk or working it as part of the service team. We wanted to know how early we could get out there and get started. Time was of the essence for me. The more I had in the yard, the better I had of getting to the twenty mile mark.

As I was wheeling Joe out of the chow hall, we ran into the sergeant who was in charge of the yard movements. I asked him if we could get out there early, and then told him my reasons. He couldn't have been any more cooperative to me. He immediately got on his radio and called to some other sergeant who would meet

us at the yard gate a half an hour earlier than the others who were walking and running. This gesture would end up making a huge difference later on in the day.

Joe and I got out there with other members of the service team as they were setting up the registration tables. We were given our Walk for Hunger name tags. The guys wrote "THE LEGEND" on Joe's and "THE RECORD" on mine. Two lap counters and spotters were also assigned to us, and the Catholic Chaplain, Deacon Art Rogers would be the staff member to verify our distance completed. He also gathered us in a circle and led us in prayer.

At 8:45 A.M. on Sunday, May 5, we were on our way.

I knew which parts of the track to avoid and which were okay, so as I start and am just about to complete our first lap, the right front wheel starts to wobble uncontrollably and throws us off pace. No way I was gonna make twenty miles with a bum wheel. Joe shifted his weight, and leaned towards the very front of his chair, and the wobbling immediately stopped. He'd have to stay that way in order for us to keep up our pace.

The other two hundred or so runners and walkers started filtering onto the track, so now I was zigging and zagging around then, but maintaining a good clip. If I could do four miles an hour, then we would be all set.

At 11:00 A.M., they closed the yard. The lap count for us was 24, which meant that we had completed eight miles, so we were right on schedule.

While in my cell during the count, I changed out of my wet clothes and put on some dry ones and downed a bottle of green tea.

They opened our doors early so that we could go to early chow and then right to the yard. While inside the chow hall, several of the guards approached Joe and I and inquired as to how far we had gone. After we had told them, we watched them literally try to do the math in their heads and figure out what was left for time and miles. Then the same yard sergeant, accompanied by two others, walks outside with us and again tells the others to make sure we get out there a half hour early. All three of them had smiles on their faces as one said to us; "You guys can do it, just keep up that pace, . . . you'll have plenty of time. Good luck."

At 1:15 P.M., I started about fifteen minutes ahead of the rest of the field and started to fly around the track, cranking rock-n-roll

on my walkman, as was Joe, feeling real good about everything. In my mind, I figured we could have the twenty miles done with at least fifteen or twenty minutes to spare.

At 1:30, the yard and track started to fill up. And being such a beautiful day outside, even more men showed up, so the track was packed with people, which meant I was doing a lot more maneuvering in and around people than I had in the morning. A lot more.

And then at about 2:15 or so, with almost 14 miles in, my right foot starts to tingle along the bottom. Blisters. And as time went on the foot got worse and worse, and my pace got slower and slower. Joe kept asking if I was all right, and I kept telling him yes, but my leg was killing me. Others noticed too, our lap counters and spotters were all yelling and cheering us on to keep going. A few friends came up and offered me water, and to relieve me for a few laps, but I wouldn't hear of it, I was not letting go of that wheelchair until I had pushed Joe across that finish line.

At 4:00, one of our lap counters, and friend, Matty, jumped in line with us and told me the latest. I had done 18 miles and had two to go in less than a half an hour. My pace had dropped off significantly, instead of being ahead by a mile of two, I was behind by two. And the prison yard shuts down at around 4:30 every day with no exceptions for the evening count.

As we passed the service team members at the finish line, about twenty or so men were standing on both sides of the track, clapping, yelling and rooting us on, slapping us high fives and patting both of us on the back, shouting words of encouragement to me.

This was a huge boost for me, and I needed it. I looked at my right foot and the back and side of my sneaker was seeping blood.

I blocked everything else out and kept repeating the same silent prayer in my head; "Please God, one more lap, Please God, just one more lap, Please God, I'm almost there, guide me through for another lap."

At 4:15, the guard tower announces over the P.A. system that the yard would be closing in ten minutes. Ten Minutes! It blared, Ten Minutes!

On the penultimate lap, just about everyone who had stayed out was at the finish line going nuts for us to do one more lap, screaming our names and encouraging us in any way that they could. As I passed

through the throng, I glanced over to my right, and saw the yard officer approaching the gate to begin the final movement, so I picked it up and went as fast as I could, but I was limping badly and couldn't go very fast. Joe was leaning forward as far as he could, like a jockey on a horse coming down the home stretch. And as we approached the finish line, I pushed Joe's chair as hard as I could and then let go. I wanted him to cross it alone because this was for him. So I stopped and watched as the crowd engulfed him in wild celebration, as tears flowed from behind my cheap sun glasses, as he raised both arms in triumphant victory. I'll never forget that sight as long as I live.

I limped over to him, and while I too was being mobbed, I leaned down and hugged him, and got one back. Then he whispered words into my ear: "Well done, your'e parents would be proud, just like I am." Amen to that.

Out of the 170 registered participants, six of us completed the entire twenty mile course, Joe and I included. As of this writing, the final tally for money raised was not yet completed as more donations are still coming, but it is somewhere north of a thousand dollars and climbing.

\$ 2273.50

Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen.

Hebrews 11:1

TOYS FOR TOTS

FUNDRAISER

at MCI Shirley

Dear APWA Editors

This letter is to ask you to pledge a support for me as I will be participating in a walk to raise funds for the Toys for Tots program. This is a fundraising walk we're having at MCI Shirley in the prison yard from 9-11 a.m. and 1:00-4:30 p.m. on October 19th. The walk is to get people to sponsor a walker by pledging a donation. All the proceeds will go direct to the Toys for Tots program.

This is a good cause and I am glad to have the opportunity to participate in it and raise funds for the less fortunate of our society. I am hoping that you will sponsor me. If you do, you can send a check made out to **TOYS FOR TOTS** and note it is from sponsoring me. Then mail the check or money order to:

Karen DiNardo, Deputy Superintendent
Toys for Tots
MCI Shirley
P.O. Box 1218
Shirley, MA 01464

The institution will then forward all the money we raised in outside pledges and inmate pledges to Toys for Tots.

Thanks for your generosity,

Michael Skinner