

Walking tall



Fraternity brothers spend spring break fundraising for MS.

by Robert Lerosé

On the first day of the walk, Connor Cavallaro sprained his ankle—and still had 150 miles to go. Popping blisters became a nightly ritual for Matthew Bertoia. Chad Jarvie carried a fallen walker on his back.

Hordes of college students head south for fun and sun during spring break. But the members of the Alpha Tau Omega (ATO) fraternity at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) in Michigan use their vacation time for ATO Walks Hard, a grueling trek by foot to raise awareness and money for multiple sclerosis.

ATO Walks Hard is one of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society's DIY events, a program in which people create their own activities to benefit the Society. "The possibilities are endless when it comes to what people can think of in this area of do-it-yourself fundraising," says Tammy Willis, Society executive director, Michigan.

Every year since the first walk was held in 2012, about 20 ATO members trudge 160 miles over eight days from Traverse City, Michigan, to their Allendale campus, sleeping in churches at night. The trail snakes through heavy woods, along busy urban roadways and over an historical railroad route. ATO walkers have raised over \$250,000 in total, while the event has become part of GVSU lore.

All kinds of support

For the 2019 walk, 21-year-old Cavallaro led the support team—making meals, helping the walkers stretch and prepping their gear at night. But it was only after he signed up for the walk as a freshman in 2017 that he learned he had a family member with MS. “When I came into college, I had no clue what MS was, and now it’s such a personal part of my life,” he says.

Cavallaro remembers the unpredictable weather on the walk: warm enough to walk shirtless some days, but fierce winds on other days that ripped trees loose and hit a walker. As Cavallaro was looking at the scenery, he accidentally stepped into a pothole and rolled his ankle after just 10 miles. He spent the evenings icing it and the mornings feeling the stiffness. Then he slapped on an ankle brace and, through pain, limped across the trail for the next seven days. “After this event, it made me closer to a lot of these people with MS and helped me understand the difficulties they go through that you really don’t see on the outside,” he says.

Being best friends

As the organizer of the 2019 walk and a participant for the third time, 21-year-old Bertoia had his hands full. But in a way, doing the walk was a nice change of pace.

“Honestly, it’s pretty fun. We have nothing else to do but hang out. There’s 30 of your best friends messing around in a church, walking on trails and having nothing to do but talk and be with them,” he says.

After covering an arduous 27-mile section in one day during his first walk in 2017, Bertoia couldn’t bend his knee. Eventually, he managed to move again by swinging his other leg around—and getting good-natured “roasting” from his fellow brothers.

Bertoia compared their nighttime breaks in churches to a big sleepover in elementary school. In between popping blisters and stretching, they would huddle in sleeping bags, play cards, watch movies—and even soak each other when they found a squirt gun. “You get 30 20-year-old guys in a room together for a week, especially if they’re already best friends, and some crazy stuff happens,” he says.

Carrying on

Bonding with his fraternity brothers appealed to 19-year-old Jarvie when he participated for the first time in 2018. “But this year, I realize it’s so much bigger than that. Knowing that I can change people’s lives with what I’m doing—that’s what motivated me to do it [in 2019],” he says.

Jarvie didn’t have to wait long to change a life. After a winter storm dumped a foot of snow on the trail in 2018, one of the walkers rolled both his ankles on the ice. Jarvie picked him up and carried him piggyback for a half-mile until the walker could get back on his feet and walk on his own again.

Listening to “old-school” Eminem helped Jarvie stay upbeat, including powering through a 13-minute mile. “I tried walking slow, but walking fast was so much less painful. I was trucking.”

Committed to helping others

As a volunteer at a muscular dystrophy summer camp and a sophomore majoring in biomedical science, 19-year-old Nate Stuart is no stranger to working on behalf of others. Hearing people around campus speak passionately about ATO Walks Hard resonated strongly with him. He signed up for his first walk in March 2019.

Stuart did a 7½-mile practice walk and stretched every night, but he knew that nothing could adequately prepare him for the magnitude of the event or the pain that came with it. It would have been understandable to bow out, but Stuart’s resolve toughened after listening to past walkers and to people living with MS.

“The first thing they’ll say is that it’s the hardest thing you’ll ever do, but it’s the greatest thing you’re ever going to do. People with MS come and talk at the kickoff event, and you see how grateful they are that we’re giving up our spring break to help them out. It’s really a ripple effect. If I can possibly make life better for someone [who lives with] MS, that’s really my goal. I’ve always had a passion for helping other people, and that’s a large part why I chose to do ATO Walks Hard,” he says.

Robert Lerosé is a Long Island, New York-based writer.

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