

The Bend in the Road

Magazine Article | Published in Senior Living Magazine, January 2010

Jacque Farris goes the distance for causes about which she is passionate. And she does so one step at a time.

Jacque, who turns 60 in April, is a long-distance power walker who cultivated her enthusiasm through a series of life-altering events. Now, she participates in various long-distance runs and walks, including the Royal Victoria Marathon, the Great Lake Walk around Lake Cowichan and the Great Walk from Gold River to Thasis.

For many of the ultra events, which are classified as any distance longer than the traditional 26.2-mile marathon, Jacque connects her participation to a fundraiser.

The transition to power walking came from trying to find a balance between work and life. “I was always athletic in school and enjoyed team sports, but distance running was not in my vocabulary,” she says. “To make a long story short, I became a critical care nurse and sports went on the wayside. In 1994, I realized I was pretty much married to my work, and decided that there was more to life, so I stepped back from my career quite a bit.”

Jacque was already a swimmer and a cyclist, so she got involved in triathlon.

“One day, I was out at Elk Lake and in the quietness and privacy of myself, I thought, ‘Let’s see what I can do here.’ If I could run or walk, I could do triathlon. I walked really fast, and realized I got around [the lake] in reasonable time. I did some slow-paced running with triathlon in the 90s.”

In 2002, however, Jacque developed a work-related bilateral hand injury called Chronic Regional Pain Syndrome. The complication, which affects her secondary sympathetic nervous system, brought Jacque’s life crashing down.

“I basically, overnight, lost my career. That threw the triathlon out the window. Swimming was very painful. I have limited use of my hands now, and significant pain.”

Around the same time, Jacque’s mother, Ellen Rae Farris, was diagnosed with dementia. Jacque attended, and later facilitated, support groups at the Alzheimer Resource Centre in Victoria. Although in pain and unable to work, this sequence of events made Jacque realize she still wanted to contribute to her community.

“In so helping others, you help yourself,” she says.

When Jacque gave up driving four years ago and began walking for transportation, she was relieved.

“I went to turn into my [parking] stall, and I had splints on my hand at the time,” she recalls. “My hands slipped and I scraped the side of my car on a pillar. I brought the car to a stop; nobody was hurt. A car can be fixed. I turned the ignition off and I never got in the car again. I think I already knew.”

Soon after, Jacquie began power walking in running events. “I knew that I would be last, but I didn’t care. It was about participating. I don’t do anything fast. I’m the endurance kind of gal,” she says with a grin.

Jacquie has lost count of the number of half marathons, marathons and ultra events she has participated in. The endorphins from the physical exercise relieve her pain, boost her self-esteem and allow her to contribute to her community in a meaningful way, all of which are motivating factors in Jacquie’s power walking.

“I’m interested in participating and achieving my own personal goals,” she says. “I love pushing myself for the distance.”

Although Jacquie is modest, her event times and fundraising efforts are impressive. In August 2008, Jacquie walked the length of the Galloping Goose and the Lochside Trail - a total of 80 km - in 10 hours and 55 minutes in support of the Family Caregivers Network. Jacquie’s mother matched her fundraising contributions and donated them to the Alzheimer Society of B.C. Between mother and daughter, they contributed over \$12,000 to the organizations.

Jacquie’s other passion revolves around someone much younger. In July of 2004, 21-year-old athlete Sean Marlowe was on his way to pick up his race package for a pre-World Cup triathlon event when he was involved in a motor vehicle accident with a tractor-trailer. The athlete, who once trained for the Beijing Olympics, sustained a permanent brain injury that left him immobile and unable to speak.

Three years later, Jacquie read a newspaper article about Sean’s mother, Cherith. She learned that it was the family’s goal to bring Sean home from Aberdeen Hospital in Victoria. At the time, Jacquie was preparing to do the Great Lake Walk. A few nights later, she bolted upright in bed with an idea.

Jacquie contacted Cherith and discovered that although the bigger picture was to bring Sean home, what his mother really wanted was to make him more mobile. Jacquie turned her participation in the 2007 Great Lake Walk into a fundraiser, and raised \$6,000 for a custom-built adult jogging stroller for Sean, called the Red Racer.

When the Red Racer arrived, Jacquie planned a community celebration at Beaver Lake Park the following April.

“The event was both to present the Red Racer to Sean and to thank the community,” Jacquie says. “Nothing inspires me more when I’m doing ultra marathons, than when I have a cause that I’m passionate about.”



At the celebration, Jacquie announced a commitment to annually complete the September Great Lake Walk as a fundraiser to support Sean's ongoing needs.

Now at home, Sean requires 24-hour care and support. At last year's Great Lake Walk, Jacquie raised enough money to purchase a modified recumbent stepper for Sean so he can exercise.

For her 60th birthday, Jacquie plans to power walk 100 km for another cause. Until then, her inspiration comes from her parents, helping others and her favourite saying, "the bend in the road is not the end of the road as long as you're willing to take the turn."

"If I didn't have my power walking, I don't know where I would be with my own disability and coping with my pain," says Jacquie. "It isn't about high performance. More important to me is that I can get out, walk to see my mom and walk to town to do the chores I need to do."

When Jacquie looks back on power walking, she thinks of her mother, once an avid walker, who appreciated the sense of community and connection with the environment that accompanied an afternoon stroll.

"Now, I look back and I really honour my mother," she says. "Yes, she did get dementia, but she has handled it so much better with her prudent lifestyle. My gratitude for some of my philosophies and values in life and my ability to move on are because of my mom."

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