

Four million steps to go

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Million step man. Chris Wilkinson will be re-visiting his past and raising funds for the future of the Trillium Health Centre when he starts a 4 million-step walkathon around the coast of England, starting at Bournemouth, the town where his mother was born. *Staff photo by Rob Beintema*

Next Monday, Family Day, as families are settling in for a day of togetherness, a Mississauga man will take the first of an estimated four million steps that will keep him away from his wife and three children for the next six months.

Chris Wilkinson is making the sacrifice to inspire people to support the Trillium Health Centre Foundation's Giving 110% fundraising campaign. He calls his effort the 4 Million Step Walk. Wilkinson, "63 years young," as he describes himself, is taking four million steps – about 3,800 kilometres – around the entire coastline of England and Wales.

Starting from his mother's birthplace of Bournemouth, in the south of England, he'll follow the seashore on the nearest roads, staying at inexpensive bed-and-breakfasts, youth hostels and, occasionally, on the beach.

"Personally, I feel blessed to be able to help," said Wilkinson during today's (Feb. 9) sendoff at the Mississauga hospital. "I'm giving 110 per cent through my 4 Million Step Walk because I can."

The 40-year Mississauga resident says Trillium has always been there for him and his family, particularly on one occasion when he was in excruciating agony from kidney stones.

"I had such severe back pain I thought I'd never walk again," he said.

Certainly, at the time, he didn't think he could walk around two countries.

"Someone calculated that with the rise and fall of the walk, up and down hills, it would be like climbing to the top of Mt. Everest two-and-a-half times from sea level," Wilkinson pointed out.

Wilkinson notes his entire trek will be solely by leg power, except for river crossings when he'll

need to use ferries. His daily target is 20 to 25 kilometres, putting in about six to seven hours on the road. At that pace, he figures he'll be back at his starting point in Bournemouth by summer's end. But that's just an estimate.

"It's difficult to be very accurate," he said. "Rain, sea fogs and strong prevailing winds can all work to slow down my progress. I have also been known to get lost on occasions when on strange roads – just ask my wife."

Wilkinson's been training diligently the past six months, putting in five to 10 miles a day, whenever his work as a management consultant allows. Sometimes he pushes along a baby buggy, loaded up with 25 pounds, to replicate what he'll be doing during his marathon walk. So far, he's lost some 17 pounds.

Finding the abandoned buggy in a snowbank last winter was a positive omen, he says. Still, he's not too sure the contraption's the best thing to lug around his gear and supplies – although it does come equipped with a handy top bar with a pair of built-in beer/tea cup holders.

"It's occurred to me that I could be the target of police patrols and child protection agencies if I'm forced to spend the night, for example, in a bus shelter," he laughed.

Wilkinson says the walk has been percolating in his mind for a number of years, but it only got serious when he approached Trillium six months ago "to add social value to the event."

The partnership is a good fit because, like himself, the community is aging and will need hospitals such as Trillium.

"I would like to think that we will be there for Trillium as it prepares itself to meet the tsunami of aging boomers with weak hearts and broken bones," he said.

"Chris Wilkinson is a wonderful ambassador for us," said Steve Hoscheit, president and CEO, Trillium Health Centre Foundation. "He's giving back to his community in an extraordinary way. Every step he takes raises funds and awareness for the Health Centre and helps patients struggling to regain their health. That's what Giving 110% is all about."

You can follow Wilkinson's walk, and donate to Trillium in his name, at www.trilliumhealthcentrefoundation.org.