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Jean Beliveau walks around the world for a noble cause

A million strides for peace

By Stephanie Maureen F. Asi, Staff Writer

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The thought of walking several kilometers under the scorching heat of the sun does not really appeal, but hearing Jean Beliveau's story may change your mind.

It started from a mid-life crisis

A man's mid-life crisis usually involves expensive hobbies, extravagant luxuries (say, a new car, a plush boat or a high-tech gadget), even women. But Beliveau had another idea — he wanted to walk, just walk. And walking he did. It just so happens that he has been trotting all over the world, across five continents, ever since. But here's the clincher: He does this to pursue a cause, that of "promoting peace and non-violence to the profit of the children of the world."

He relates, "It started like it was a mid-life crisis. One day, it came in my mind to go around the world. It was not for anything (at first), it was just to escape. I kept the idea a secret for eight months. Then I told my wife."

While other wives would've been perplexed or furious by his sudden decision that would change their whole lives, Beliveau's wife was supportive. He narrates that she simply asked how he would do it and after explaining his plan, she let him go. So understanding was his wife that she even asked if they needed to file for divorce, but Beliveau declined because he is still very much in love with her.

"The idea of peace was from my wife," he says. "When my wife said walk for peace, we heard before that Unesco has made a decree for 2010 as International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World. We said, 'I'm going to (finish by) about that time. Why not dedicate the walk to that?' So it parachuted to a beautiful mission," he explains.

Real-life Forrest Gump

On his 45th birthday, Aug. 18, 2000, Beliveau left his home in Montreal, Canada and set off for his goal. With just \$3,000 on his wallet, he pushed his buggy, his very own "mobile home" (it contains just about everything he needs — clothes, some food, a tent, first aid kit, materials for the buggy's repair) and started his walking. His goal was concrete: Walk 75,000 kilometers, across 66 countries for 11 years. It has been no easy feat. Just imagine traveling the world mostly on foot with no certainty of where to sleep and eat and without any idea who you are going to meet. But it is not impossible.

To date, Beliveau has walked nearly 67,000 kilometers, traveled to 56 countries and has done so in eight and a half years using 40 pairs of shoes already. He walks 30 to 35 kilometers each day. He has not gone back to Montreal, Canada, but his wife comes every year — wherever he may be at the time — to meet him and, for a month, he stops walking.

He's a real life Forrest Gump. But unlike Gump, he knows where he is going, when he will finish and the reason he is doing it. "I walk not for (a) world record. (Sure), the longest walk without going home (will be a record). But I would've never have claimed it," Beliveau shares.

Lessons from his footsteps

In the eight and a half years Beliveau has been walking for children and for peace, he has been taken in by more than a thousand families who unhesitatingly offered him shelter for the day or night and a place to live no matter how brief his stay was. He has also slept in churches, mosques and even in police stations, proving that despite the cultural differences, kindness is universal.

"I (have been) received by 1,200 families — different kinds of people, culture (and) faith," Beliveau

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says. He admits his lifestyle isn't easy, being away from his family and living with just the basics such as food, water and clothing. But he gets by. He says he is able to continue to travel because of other people's good deeds. People from all over the world have pitched in for his travel expenses like airfare and even for some clothes and food. His walk is continually sustained by the people with whom he comes across who are willing to help. "The great thing about my walk is the people. It's like in the relay, I'm a baton, the stick. The people, they take care of me. They release me after sharing good food. They ask me, 'You need anything?' And then I go. For me, I walk to promote peace for children," he tells The Daily Tribune.

The experience is not without its challenges. Though he has grown accustomed to it, he shares that he did encounter an experience that broke him down. Halfway through Africa, in Ethiopia, he had a culture shock that made him decide to quit his walk. But with the encouragement of his wife, whom he e-mailed about his hardships in the African country, he was able to muster enough courage to continue and get back on his feet again.

Walk with him

Beliveau may have taken almost a million strides already after close to a decade's walking. These are strides with a purpose. It's people like him who make us ask, "What have I done to help others lately?" This March 15, Sunday, you can have the opportunity to share his vision and like him, support peace for children. You can join him on a three-kilometer walk and support his chosen charity, the Virlanie Foundation. The walk will begin at Luneta Park at 7 a.m., traverse Roxas Boulevard and end at the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

Like his experiences, this event is actually a product of many coincidences that life has thrown him, which he chose to embrace. He recounts how he met a guy in Taiwan who knew Billy Crawford, Virlanie's ambassador, and later introduced him. Talks followed and soon they were preparing for the walk in the Philippines.

No matter how great his achievements are, Beliveau remains humble. "I don't want to change the world. I cannot change the world. For me, I want to change my own vision of the world, to see the world in the eyes of love. It's not easy. It's a full-time job because life isn't easy. But I think, if that walk, that moment, touches the hearts of the people, then it is mission accomplished for me," he muses.

To join the walk, send your name, number and e-mail address to walkforpeacephil@gmail.com or call the Virlanie Foundation at 895-3460 or 0920-9831442. Visit www.walk.org.

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