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Walking For A Cure

by Bridget Samburg

October 31, 2000

Beyond raising money, participants in the Avon 3 Day walk for breast cancer offer women everywhere encouragement and hope.



In recent years, medical researchers have made considerable progress in their efforts to find a cure for cancer as well as better ways to treat the disease. Contributions from countless individuals — ranging from wealthy philanthropists who have given many millions of dollars to ordinary citizens who have taken part in fund-raising drives — have helped advance these efforts. In the following story, Worth.com looks at one such effort.

My husband's cousin Asha was diagnosed with breast cancer last year. She was 24 years old; I was 25.

The news was shocking. Breast cancer at age 24? "Isn't that something found in women in their 40s and 50s?," I asked myself. My

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At the time, I was more comfortable talking about 'cancer' - a word that bombarded me from magazine covers and billboards - than I was mentioning the word "breasts." This would change.

As I read up on the disease and scanned the statistics I learned that a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer once every three minutes. One woman dies of breast cancer every 14 minutes and one in nine women will, at some point, contract breast cancer. Women under 30 get breast cancer, and so do ones over 80. Suddenly, I was acutely aware of breasts and the cancer that plagues them.

One night last February I read about the Avon Breast Cancer 3-Day walk in a newspaper ad. It was a call to women (and men) willing to walk approximately 60 miles from Bear Mountain, in upstate New York, to New York City to raise awareness about the disease and money for research to combat it. Along with Asha, her mother, and five of her friends, I signed up.

On Friday, October 13, at 7:30 in the morning 3000 women and men began the walk. We headed south along the Hudson River, which at this time of year was dotted with the vibrant colors of fall. The air was crisp and the morning dew hadn't yet evaporated.

I was anxious, and nervous. We'd be walking all day, showering inside converted 18-wheeler trucks, and sleeping in tents — I'd be paired up with a stranger. And we'd have to use flashlights to find the portable toilets in the middle of the night.

At the first of many pit stops, we were cheered on by some of the 500 volunteers who help run the show. Their clapping and screaming, as well as the snacks and bottled water they offered us, was reassuring and comforting.

For three days we walked, talked and encouraged each other through physical aches and pains, and emotional surges of fear, grief, recovery, and hope.

On Saturday and Sunday swarms of local residents came out to applaud us. Some held signs. One man rang a cow bell. Some women baked symbolic pink ribbon sugar cookies to show their support. And so many said, "Thank you for walking."

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Part Two: Giving In Time, Spirit And Encouragement



It was the encouragement from each onlooker, fellow walker, and volunteer that kept me going for 60 miles. It was knowing that if I kept walking perhaps one day no woman would ever have to deal with breast cancer. It was knowing that the woman walking next to me, Alison Mills Carroll — once a stranger and now sharing my tent — has been dealing with adolescent abnormal pre-cancerous growth in her breasts since she was 16. I was inspired by her resolve and commitment.

"For me it was one of the most spiritual things I've ever done," says Mills Carroll, 25. "You're doing something for other people that is intangible."

While the Avon walk does raise an intangible amount of awareness, it also raises a remarkable amount of money. Started in 1998 in Los Angeles, the walk is now held in seven cities. The walks netted \$20 million in 1998/1999 and \$43.1 million this year. The 2000 New York walk alone raised a record high for all the walks of \$7.5 million. Participants are required to raise

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\$1800 each.

Sixty-six percent of the proceeds go toward breast cancer research. Pallotta TeamWorks, the California-based company responsible for organizing these walks and other events, including the AIDSRide, receives a flat fee that comes to approximately four percent of the money raised. And the rest is used to market, organize and produce the 3-Day.

But money seems obsolete when you're walking for three days. The kind of giving we talked about manifested itself in the form of time, spirit, and encouragement.

"You give, but you also get back a sense of accomplishment and a sense of contribution," says Diane O'Meally, 40, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in April 1999. "If you weren't a giver though, you wouldn't participate in the walk."

O'Meally finished her treatment last April and walked with her 65-year-old mother after raising a record \$125,000. She says her goal was to raise more money than any individual ever had. "I've never really asked anybody for anything," she says. So, she wrote what she calls an "emotional" pledge letter and received an overwhelming response. O'Meally attributes much of her fundraising success to the fact that breast cancer is personal for so many people, whether because of a wife, mother, sister, friend, or colleague.

By Sunday, we were all exhausted — our bodies ached, our feet were blistered. The three days had been both a physical and an emotional challenge. And it was an adventure for thousands of women who stood together and walked together, unified in fighting a disease that has the potential to effect every single one of us.

At the closing ceremony, along with the tears in our eyes, there were smiles from the satisfaction of having made new friends and of having come together in solidarity so that someday, we will never have to

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