

Six Days, 850 Kilometers, Niagara Falls To Tobermory On The Bruce Trail

By Shawna Dennis

Over 10 million children die annually before reaching the age of five. Brian Culbert wants to do something about that. An Investment Advisor in CIBC Wood Gundy's Toronto Commerce Court North Branch, Brian is no stranger to taking his philanthropy to the extreme. But his most recent venture wasn't just borderline crazy, it was near impossible.

Brian and his biking partner, Dave Battison, developed a bucket list of things they wanted to accomplish - and one of the things on that list was running the entire Bruce Trail, all 850 km of it.

Not so hard you say? Well, they gave themselves only six days to do it. And they set a fundraising goal of \$1 million in support of HealthyKids™ International, an organization that raises funds to support the international projects of The Hospital for Sick Children.

"When I first met Brian, I was overwhelmed by his story," recalls Stacia Neale, Fundraising Operations with Healthy Kids International. "And when he told me what he planned to do, I was incredulous... but not surprised."

The thing about an initiative like this is that everything HAD to go right in order for them to pull it off. The team spent months training and working out the logistics of not only the trail, but their bodies – they had to know exactly what their bodies needed in order to function through the equivalent of two marathons a day.

"One more day and it would have been doable", says Brian. "But we chose six days because it was almost impossible – what's the point if you make it doable?"

The race began in Niagara Falls on the morning of Sunday, September 13th – there's a stone cairn marking the beginning and end of the trail and Brian stood with his hand on the cairn until the clock hit 10:00 a.m., at which point he began his journey. Brian's children, Matt, 9, and Emily, 12, ran the first half a kilometer with him to get him on his way.

But of course, Murphy's Law had to intervene to make things more challenging: The week before the race, Brian was riding his mountain bike with his son and during a routine jump, he slammed his left kneecap into the handle bars. Although bruised and sore, he didn't think much of it... until he began running and, in the first couple of kilometers, dislodged his kneecap. But true to form, Brian ran the rest of the race with his leg taped from the upper thigh to below his knee to keep his kneecap in place.

Brian and Dave ran in shifts of three hours on the first day, then dropped it down to two-hour shifts to accommodate for the extreme trail conditions.

"We underestimated the severity of the trail," said Brian. "Parts are almost impassable. I'd say 40% of the trail was okay for running; 15% of it we were barely walking it. It's truly shocking how rugged the trail is – it was sheer joy when you'd hit a flat part and were able to run eight or nine km an hour."

They exited the trail at predetermined blazes (trail markers) which meant they had to keep a close eye out for the markers to make sure they stayed on track... at one point, Brian found himself at a dead end after missing a marker hidden in a corn field, having to back track and losing valuable time.

And that wasn't the only hiccup: The first night, Dave's lights failed and he lost an hour. The next night the car they used to follow the runners died in Oakville and they had to make an emergency trip to Budd's BMW to get it fixed – by the time they got back on the road, they had lost Dave's radio signal and had to back track along the route until they got close enough to Dave to reach him by radio.

But perseverance is something these men know something about and they continued on undaunted.

"It was a mental exercise in concentration. Most of the time, we ran in a trance", recalled Brian, "time was abstract. You'd be running along and the next thing you knew, 45 minutes had passed – it felt like 10 minutes!"

Once they completed their stretch and tagged off, they hiked out of the trail and back to the motor home where they would eat and begin the recovery process, which included donning cryo cuffs that pump cold water to create compression and elevating their legs to take down the swelling.



Brian recovers from his stretch while providing an update on Twitter.

Of course, Brian and Dave had a great team supporting them and couldn't have pulled it off without the help of two extremely dedicated men: Eddy Betinol, a physiotherapist from Vancouver Island, was the "chief medical officer" and pulled out all the tricks in order to help Brian and Dave get through this grueling task; Kevin Hillock was in charge of navigation, transportation and logistics – he got them where they needed to go. He was also the final check before the guys went out on the trail making sure they were fully equipped and ready to go.

The team used technology as a medium to share the real time experience. GPS tracking allowed supporters to follow their progress along the trail through Google Maps, while Twitter and Facebook not only served to promote the Race, but provided updates as they went along.

"Closer to Collingwood it became evident that more and more people were following us – the outpouring of messages was amazing," said Brian. "It was incredibly isolating on the trail and it was great to get back to the motor home and connect with people online."

In fact, his online presence brought him back in touch with people from his past. A public school friend he hasn't seen in almost 40 years saw his Facebook page and made a donation from her current residence in Australia and another friend saw the Race website, found out it was Brian and sent him a personal message and made a online donation.

The support received from locals as they made their way along the trail was nothing short of amazing. A local café in Blue Mountain prepared a full day's worth of food for them, while another Collingwood local fixed some problems with the motor home. At one point a total stranger delivered food to Brian on the trail: "I was running along and suddenly there was this lady there with food for me – surreal."

When it came to weather conditions, Brian and Dave have seen it all: torrential rain, freezing cold, oppressive heat. But with a touch of fall in the air and the leaves just beginning to turn, Mother Nature was on their side and the weather was perfect – they couldn't have had better conditions for running.

"The Bruce Trail is stunningly beautiful," shares Brian, "we have no idea what we have right under our noses." Unfortunately, things began to go downhill for the men on day four.

Brian recalls: "At one point, my feet actually felt like they were going to shatter, my socks were full of blood and Eddy had to perform minor 'surgery' on my toes to release the pressure".

As mental fatigue began to set in, even though they shortened their intervals, they were having a hard time focusing. Some local runners joined Dave and Brian on the trail for the final day and a half acting as "angel runners" – essentially, there to make sure nothing happened to them.

Half way through day five, Eddy pulled the plug when Brian and Dave's short-term memory started to fail – a sign of mental distress. They had completed just over 600 km in five and a half days.

"Physically we were doing very well – the body is an incredibly adaptive machine and the pain became abstract. But mentally... well, at one point we asked for pain killers and Eddy gave them to us. Five minutes later, we asked for them again not remembering we just had them."

Their run stopped just outside of Owen Sound, so they drove to Tobermory and ran the last 10 km with the sunrise as their backdrop to reach the cairn at the end of the trail. It was bittersweet, to say the least, but when asked to sum it up, Brian replied "it was a life experience and an incredible adventure; we were so happy to rise to the challenge." And the craziest part is, he would do something like this again... providing his wife didn't kill him first.

"I can't say enough about Brian," commented Stacia, who was there at the end to meet Brian. "He's an extraordinary person, willing to do extraordinary things for people he'll never meet."

CIBC Wood Gundy has been the main supporter of this event and Brian's sincere thanks go out to Victor Dodig and Tom Monahan for making it happen. But now the real race begins as they push to reach that one million dollar mark. They've raised \$114,000 to date with commitments for more and HealthyKids is dedicated to supporting Brian in any way necessary to help him reach this goal.

"Partnering with Brian and Dave is a real gift for us," says Stacia. "The race has such impact and a huge wow factor - we're looking to capitalize on the momentum and create a movement in our quest to help change the lives of children around the world."



Brian and Dave approach the cairn at the finish line.

To learn more about the Race or make a donation, please visit www.the850race.com. For more information on HealthyKids International, please [click here](#).

Support For Brian Continues...

Sunnybrook School's Terry Fox Run on October 2nd gave a portion to the Terry Fox Foundation and the rest to The 850 Race. Both Matt and Emily attend(ed) Sunnybrook which is an International Baccalaureate World School.

In addition, Bruce Peninsula District School is holding a cross country run with all funds raised going directly to The 850 Race.



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