

## **St. Marys residents attend breast cancer walk in Washington D.C.**

*Byline: Heather Perry*

Pinned to the backpack of a woman in her twenties was a note that hit home with the walkers of the 12<sup>th</sup> annual Avon Walk for Breast Cancer held in Washington D.C. on May 3 and 4.

*I'd walk 1,000 miles for one more day with my mom.*

The Avon Walk is hosted in eight different cities each year. Two thousand people from 42 states attended the two-day walk in Washington D.C., which raised over \$4.5 million. The money went to various organizations for breast cancer treatment and research.

From St. Marys, Brenda Sommars, Amy Lett, Marcy Sandberg, Brian Mays and Connor Biswell attended the walk to honor their loved ones who have had breast cancer. In Connor's case, he went to support his mother, Julie, who was one of 260 breast cancer survivors that participated in the 39.3 mile walk.

"I was diagnosed when he was one, and so that's all he's ever known is to grow up in a household where mom has had cancer," Julie said.

Julie never heard the words "cancer-free" come out of her doctor's mouth, but after chemotherapy, radiation, and seven years of medication, she finished with treatments in 2013 and was proud to call herself a survivor at the 2014 walk.

Connor was able to be a part of the Youth Crew after raising \$500, writing five essays and doing two phone interviews. He was the youngest of the 16-member group and from the furthest away, but he embraced the role that he played with maturity. Among other tasks, the kids set up tents and tables, hauled chairs, filled water bottles and cheered on walkers during the event.

One of Julie's favorite moments from the walk was seeing Connor at mile 7.8 with a whistle in his mouth, a clapper in one hand, and a cowbell in the other.

"Just being Connor— dancing and cheering on people. I was just so proud of him," Julie said. "Cause I was starting to hurt, and he gave me the strength to keep moving."

The members of the St. Marys team motivated each other throughout their fundraising and training journeys this year. Each person raised at least \$1,800 to participate. The group created t-shirts that went with their theme, "Be the Hope," sold Valentine's novelties to St. Marys High School students and wrote personal letters to local businesses. Together they raised over \$12,000.

“It’s a time to do something for ourselves,” Julie said. “Yeah, the dishes pile up at home and the laundry piles up at home and the kids eat pizza more, because we’re so tired, but it’s just something that we do for ourselves so that we can help other people.”

The team trained for the walk with a 12-week regimen. On the weekends, they walked long distances at Lake Shawnee in Topeka, where the trail surrounding the park has a distance of about seven miles. Overall, the team walked a total of 380 miles while training. There were a lot of blisters, aches, pains and “road rash,” but Julie said that it was well worth it.

“The pain is going to go away and the blisters are going to heal, but there’s still no cure,” she said. “We’re getting closer and more people are surviving and they’re surviving longer, but until there’s a cure, we’re going to put ourselves through this so other people don’t have to.”

The weather was calm this year in Washington D.C. at 75 degrees with no rain. Julie, Lett, Sandberg and Sommars were all thankful for that. Last year when they did the walk in Chicago, it was raining and cold at 55 degrees.

This was Mays’ first year of walking. Lett and Sommars have done the walk twice before and it was Sandberg and Biswell’s third year.

The distance of 39.2 miles would have been intimidating to the team had they not trained properly for it. The first day is a marathon at 26.2 miles starting at the Washington Monument Grounds and the second day is a half marathon at 13.1. Fortunately, there are rest stops along the route that offer walkers water and snacks, but most importantly, motivation.

Each rest stop was meant to be fun and inspiring. Themes included: Rock and Roll, Hollywood, Pajama Party, Fiesta and Disco. Volunteers at each rest station dressed up to go along with the theme while music blared to stimulate tired walkers.

Throughout the route, motivators cheered the walkers on and handed out food and beverage items to give them energy. Some would start doing this on one end of the route and drive miles down the road to meet the walkers again.

Walkers donned pink attire, some wearing tutus and crowns. They were fed breakfast, lunch, snacks and dinner, which were all paid for by their registration fees. Many of them chose to sleep overnight in the pink tents provided by Avon, but the St. Marys group opted for the comfort of hotel beds.

Every three minutes, someone’s life changes forever after being diagnosed with breast cancer. During the walk, Avon volunteers placed sashes over the shoulders of random walkers every three minutes to represent people being diagnosed in real time. By the end of the walk, over 600 people wore the sashes. Some walkers got more than one sash to represent people who have had breast cancer more than once.

Sommars, Mays and Connor all got sashes this year.

“It was kind of rough,” Julie said. “You know, they hang them up and give them back at the end of the weekend saying they don’t have cancer, which is nice, but it would be nice to be able to not have cancer and put it back in your drawer.”

A sea of people half a mile long cheered and held up signs for the walkers crossing the finish line at mile 39.2. The support given by caring strangers gave the exhausted and sore St. Marys team the boost of energy needed to clasp hands and cross over the finish line together.

After it was all over, the team was physically and emotionally drained. Julie said that it usually takes her about four months to recover and consider doing the walk again. This time, it took her less than two weeks. She and Connor have already signed up for next year’s Washington D.C. walk to do it all over again in 2015.

### **Local Sponsors for St. Marys Avon Walk Team**

Alma/St. Marys Volleyball Pink Night  
American Family Insurance  
Applehanz Roofing  
Becker Lassen Insurance Agency, Inc.  
Briggs Auto  
Casa of Shawnee County  
Custom Wood Products  
Farmers State Bank- Westmoreland  
Gideon Excavating  
JB Pearl Sales and Service  
Kaw Valley State Bank  
MJ’s Coffee House  
One-on-One Lawn Care  
Pearl Real Estate  
Pink Night at St. Marys High School  
Piper Funeral Home  
St. Marys State Bank  
Topeka Orthodontics- Dr. Mark Underwood  
St. Marys Teamworks