

Calgary Herald

Terry Fox's 50th birthday lights up inspiring memories; Today, Terry is an international hero, larger than life . . .

Thu Jul 31 2008

Page: A8

Section: The Editorial Page

Byline: Paula Arab

Column: Paula Arab

Source: Calgary Herald

Like most Canadians, I had never heard of Terry Fox the day he dipped a running shoe into the Atlantic Ocean and launched his Marathon of Hope.

By the time he landed in my home province of Nova Scotia, only three people showed up for his arrival. It was still early and difficult to garner attention for his cross-Canada run to raise money for cancer research.

Today, Terry is an international hero, larger than life, long after his death 27 years ago.

It's hard to believe, but that brave young man who captured the hearts of the nation so many years ago would have turned 50 this week.

For his family, the pain and loss is as strong today as the strength of his legacy.

"My husband and I went to the cemetery, took flowers and cards, and stayed for awhile," his mother Betty Fox shares with me. "I was pretty low. I'm a weepy kind of person anyway."

She tells me it's still difficult, despite the healing power of time and the success of the Terry Fox Foundation, which has raised more than \$400 million for cancer research in his name.

He was her baby, and Monday would have been his birthday.

"I can't imagine him being 50 because he has never grown from the stage he left us in."

Terry will remain forever young to all of us who remember that summer of hope, as I tend to think of it.

I was just a tween, but, along with my parents, siblings and friends, we were captivated by his courage, his presence, his strength, his grit and his determination. And he was adorably cute, with those heartbreak curls.

More than anything, it was the first time the country had ever heard of anyone pushing themselves beyond what was conceivably their physical limits, to raise money for a good cause.

Terry ran the equivalent of a marathon a day, on one leg and an uncomfortable prosthesis, hoping to convince all Canadians to give just \$1 each, to raise \$22 million.

He did it not for himself, but because he was so overwhelmed by the suffering of others he left behind in the cancer ward.

"He believed there wasn't enough money for cancer research and that something had to be done about it," says his mom. "He believed so strongly, in his soul, and that was projected in everything he said and did. His honesty and sincerity in what he was doing, and in what he believed."

I'm not one for heroes, but Terry inspired me like no one ever has before or since.

Being in Nova Scotia, we were among the first cheerleaders to jump on the Terry bandwagon. His dream created excitement on those long summer days of childhood, the ones that stretch on with endless boredom, back when kids played outside and had only their imaginations with which to entertain themselves.

Every night, my mother would call us to the television when the Marathon of Hope update came on. I can still see the lines of pain and determination on his face, jumping out of the supper hour news and into our living room.

"Run, Terry, Run," we sang, willing him to keep going, to not give up, to take another step. We did this ritual as he ran across Prince Edward Island, into New Brunswick and on to Quebec. Finally, outside Thunder Bay, he was forced to stop because the cancer had returned.

That was Sept. 1, 1980. He ran 5,373 kilometres in 143 days. The Marathon of Hope went on without him, raising a total of \$24.17 million.

How I cried that day, and again when he was given the Order of Canada, and looked so handsome in his suit. More tears followed during his televised funeral in June, 1981. And even more this week,

while his mom was telling me what he had been like.

How can a stranger leave such an impression on so many people? What is so special about this man that has touched so many lives around the world, in countries rich and poor, big and small, who all participate in annual Terry Fox runs?

I ask Betty, 71, hoping to understand.

"He was always caring from the time he was very young. His concerns were always so much deeper than an ordinary person his age, at a young age," says Betty.

Those traits became more pronounced after he was diagnosed with cancer, and saw the pain and suffering of others.

In Terry's own words: "I just wish people would realize that anything's possible if you try; dreams are made possible, if you try."

He believed his run would inspire others. If he could only know how right he was.

What Terry accomplished in just 22 years, most people will only dream of doing in a lifetime -- never mind what's been achieved in his name ever since.

Last fall, I found myself in Victoria and had the chance to do what all Canadians should do at least once. I made my way to Mile Zero and visited the Terry Fox statue. Then I dipped my toes into the Pacific, and said a prayer for Terry.

parab@theherald.canwest.com

© 2008 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.