

N.C. woman SOARs for rural elderly and caregivers
by Errol Castens/NEMS Daily Journal Oxford Bureau

13 days ago | 671 views | 0  | 6  |  | 



Teri Swezey walks recently in Holly Springs, Ala., on her coast-to-coast trek to raise funds for and awareness of vulnerable elderly people and their caregivers. She made her way through Northeast Mississippi last week. (Courtesy)
OXFORD - Teri Swezey's sore feet reflect a SOAR feat.

The Chapel Hill, N.C., resident walked through Northeast Mississippi last week in her coast-to-coast trek to publicize and raise funds for the needs of vulnerable elderly and their caregivers through a nonprofit, SOAR: Seniors Obtaining Assistance and Resources, that she helped found.

A university researcher in health care issues, Swezey had aspired for more than three decades to walk cross-country ever since she read Peter Jenkins' "Walk Across America."

"As I progressed through education, I knew I wanted to walk for a cause that combined my education with activism for something I was passionate about and raising awareness," she said. For a time that passion was AIDS education, whose social aspects she'd researched in Madagascar. It was caring for her elderly mother, Mary Swezey, that provided a different focus.

"I was very, very honored to be able to take care of Mom," Teri Swezey said. "It was extremely challenging for three years, and very rewarding. It provided some of the sweetest moments of my life and taught me a lot of life lessons."

Swezey sold her house to fund the trip, for which a friend follows along in a vehicle. Since dipping her feet in the Atlantic at Wrightsville Beach, N.C., on April 1, she's made

her way through South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and now Mississippi. She plans to traverse Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada and California before reaching the Pacific in her parents' longtime hometown of Cambria, Calif.

Swezey is intentionally routing the trip mostly through rural areas and small towns, where caregivers' services are rarest.

"There are a bunch of cuts going on right now that are affecting services to seniors, and caregivers are a hidden population," she said. "Taking care of somebody can be extremely isolating, extremely stressful, under-recognized by society. There are not enough respite care services to help give caregivers a break."

Besides fundraising, meeting with people and documenting her experiences, Swezey's daily concerns include keeping on her route and staying safe.

"My immediate goals during each day's walk are to make contact with every driver, don't walk in the grass, because there are snakes in the grass ... try to stay upright and think about where I'm going," she said. "Oh, and not to become a hood ornament."

Swezey is collecting caregivers' stories on her website. She's also raising funds for assistance with prescription co-pays, for meals-on-wheels programs to help seniors stay in their homes and for caregiver respite services, such as First Friends in Amory and Memory Makers in Oxford.

"If I can get two people per mile along the way to donate a penny a mile for each of the 3,000 miles, I can raise \$180,000," she said.

Needs of the elderly and their caregivers are only going to grow, Swezey said.

"Baby boomers are aging, and we're caring for our parents. There are 10 million Americans caring for an aging relative," she said. "Soon, we're going to be the elderly who need caregiving."

For more information or to donate to Swezey's effort, visit walkusa4soar.org.

errol.castens@journalinc.com

Read more: djournal.com - [N C woman SOARs for rural elderly and caregivers](#)