

Walking to raise awareness of caregivers

By Kayleigh Skinner

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Teri Swezey has a cause that enables her to carry out a long-time dream. Her experiences caring for her mother, Mary, who had end-stage dementia, motivated her to start walking across the country on behalf of a cause. Swezey has wanted to do the walk since her early 20s, and accomplish it before she turned 60. She is 57 and walked into Oxford this week on her journey west to California.

A public health researcher, Swezey decided to do the bi-coastal walk in honor of her mother to raise awareness of the difficulties caregivers face when caring for their loved ones. “Over the years, as I got my education, I thought, ‘Well, I want to combine my education with activism,’” Swezey said.

The logo for the walk was inspired by her mother, who was a talented diver. It is the outline of a woman, her back arched in a perfect swan dive. Swezey formed a private nonprofit group called Seniors Obtaining Assistance and Resources Inc., or SOAR. Her walk across America is called SOAR Feat 2012. She left Wrightsville Beach, N.C., on April 1, and reached Oxford on Tuesday. She hopes to reach her final destination of Cambria, Calif., in October.

“As I move across the country,” Swezey said, “I have the opportunity to learn from people about the challenges they are facing as caregivers. Yet despite the stresses, in my view, caregiving is a selfless act of love.”

Swezey hits the road at between 7:30 and 9 each morning so that she can cover 15 to 20 miles a day. Although she says she is on schedule, she has encountered a few setbacks on her journey. At the start of her second week of walking, she suffered severe dehydration and a kidney infection in Myrtle Beach, S.C. and had to rest in a hotel for a week. This didn’t worry Swezey; she said she understands that sometimes life intervenes and her schedule is flexible. For security, she carries pepper spray and her partner, Robert Hoggard, drives a few hours behind her towing the small trailer that is their home for the trip. “It is a different experience being out there and being a woman,” Swezey said. “(As a man) you’re probably not going to get harassed. I’ve only been harassed twice.”

Encountering generosity

People can donate to Swezey’s campaign, SOAR Feat 2012, at www.walkyusa4soar.org. She’s been impressed by the generosity of strangers — people can donate on the website, but people also give her money as she meets them on her walk. “People stop and give me the change they’ve got in their pockets,” she said. “One thing about Mississippi is they’re friendly, I’m so impressed by the hospitality.”

Jo Ann O’Quin of Oxford hosted Swezey in her home during her short stay in the community. O’Quin heard about her through media coverage in Tupelo, and contacted her soon after. Both women share similar goals — to raise funds and awareness about

aging issues. For instance, funds raised by the SOAR Feat 2012 walk will go toward assistance with prescription co-pays, supporting low-income meal programs, such as Meals on Wheels, and relief services for caregivers. “I feel very strongly that seniors should not have to decide between medicine and food,” Swezey said. “Meals on Wheels helps seniors to stay in their homes.”

Swezey said that her personal experience caring for her mother taught her that caregivers are faced with an exhausting job and sometimes need a break to recuperate. “Most people have heard of Meals on Wheels, but not many people have heard of respite services.” O’Quin said. O’Quin co-founded Memory Makers, a program for those with memory loss which also provides respite for caregivers in Oxford.

Swezey’s final destination is Cambria, because that is her parents’ adopted hometown and where they are buried. Swezey’s mother knew about the cross-country walk and thought the idea was risky and even a bit “crazy.” Swezey said her mother’s diving and her walk across America both involve risks. “Why do you want to do this walk,” her mother would ask Swezey. Referring to a photo of her mom standing backwards on a high dive before taking off in flight, Swezey would tell her: “Why did you stand on high dives ready to launch yourself into infinity? You love to fly. I like my feet on the ground.”

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