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A coast-to-coast trek for a worthy cause

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PETER McCANDLESS; JENNIE DWYER (INSET)

A COAST-TO-COAST TREK FOR A WORTHY CAUSE.....

MANY PEOPLE WILL GO to great lengths to help a friend, but few would go as far as Alastair McCandless '97.

He's walking 3,600 miles — all the way across America — to raise money for the Wounded Warrior Project in honor of Ken Dwyer '98, a U.S. Army Special Forces officer wounded in August of 2006 in Afghanistan. Dwyer was hit with a rocket-propelled grenade and lost his left hand and left eye, among other injuries.

For McCandless, the trek is both a way to support a great cause and a time for personal renewal.

After spending 14 years in the food service industry, he felt he needed to pursue something more fulfilling. He came up with the idea of "taking a long walk" to raise awareness and funds for a worthy program.

He was still undecided on which organization to support, though, when he placed a call to Dwyer, his Pi Kappa Phi fraternity brother at Furman. "I was asking him what I should do to train for a long walk, because he's in Special Forces," says McCandless. "He would know what I needed to do to walk 20 miles a day."

Dwyer provided more than training tips. He told McCandless about the Wounded Warrior Project, which played a major role in his own recovery — and suddenly McCandless had his cause. He decided to walk from Delaware to California along the northern route of the American Discovery Trail, with a goal of raising \$25,000 for the WWP.

Dwyer, now back on active duty as a major in command operations, says, "I told him it would take a while to train, but he has certainly done it, and I'm impressed with what he's trying to do."

McCandless, a Greenville resident, has proven he was more than just talk. Starting April 23 in Cape Henlopen, Del., he made his way over the next six months to Omaha, Neb., more than halfway to his destination. Then he decided to take a break to avoid traversing the rugged Rocky Mountains during the dead of winter. In April he plans to return to Omaha to resume his walk,



Dwyer (left) and McCandless head to the trail.

which will include 12,000 feet of elevation. Assuming all goes well, he'll finish this fall at Point Reyes National Seashore near San Francisco.

During the first portion of his walk, McCandless maintained a pace of 20 miles per day while carrying a 40-pound backpack. Along the way he lost 30 pounds. Each night he looked for a campsite, a church, or a person willing to take him in. He says he was amazed by how much help people offered when they learned what he was doing and why.

"The best thing is, this has taken away a lot of the cynicism I had. It's been so amazing the extent people will go to help. It's renewed my belief in mankind."

As for his cause, the Wounded Warrior Project helps thousands of injured soldiers and caregivers by providing such programs as stress recovery workshops, caregiver retreats, employment assistance services and peer mentoring.

Jennie Randall Dwyer '97, Ken's wife, says that even the small services have a big impact. She learned about the WWP during the blur of the first few days after Ken was injured, when he was at Walter Reed National

Military Medical Center. Just when the family needed it, they received a backpack filled with basics like underwear, gym shorts, shirts and deodorant.

"Ken was evacuated with nothing but his uniform," she says. "And packing was the farthest thing from my mind. I had an almost three-year-old son, and I was four months pregnant. But as soon as he needed these things, the Wounded Warrior Project was there. It made life easier."

Having mastered use of his prosthetic hand, Ken says he can now do everything he used to do, including play baseball with his son, 8-year-old Timothy, using a technique he learned by watching one-handed pitcher Jim Abbott. Daughter Julia, 5, grabs his prosthesis without a second thought and has even slept with it on occasion.

Ken, who joined McCandless for a few days during the first leg, is back on deployment status. "People ask why I'd want to do that," he says. "But it's like an athlete who trains his whole life to compete in the Olympics, and then someone says you can't compete anymore. For me, not deploying would be like not competing." If he isn't deployed, he and Jennie, who currently live in California, hope to be in San Francisco when their friend completes his journey this fall.

As for McCandless, when acquaintances questioned his sanity, he knew there was one person who understood that our only limitations are those we set for ourselves. "Others didn't think he could do it," says Ken. "But I told him, 'You can do whatever you put your mind to.'"

— LEIGH GAUTHIER SAVAGE

Visit www.thoughtsaskew.blogspot.com to read McCandless' account of his walk and to donate to his effort. The author, a 1994 graduate, is a freelance writer in Simpsonville, S.C.