

The Big Beach Walk

Written by Kim Ogren, BT Contributor
February 2020

Fort Lauderdale to South Beach. How hard is that?



I am a walker. But for several years I wasn't able to walk more than 20 steps. I hobbled everywhere in great pain. Having spent years sitting vigil, tending to my parents' every need, my muscles atrophied and joints got misaligned.

I would only learn this after my parents passed and I tried to spring back into action. I spent more than two years under some sort of medical supervision or another. Ultimately, and with no indication that it would be possible, I decided I'd walk from Fort Lauderdale to South Beach. It was something I'd wanted to do for more than a decade. It's not *that* far. I estimated 23 miles. Over the course of two days.

"Can't you get that done in one day?" asked my husband, an avid runner. But that wasn't the point. There were many motivations and I was hoping for many experiences that I'll be writing about over the next couple of columns.

What started as a simple compulsion to walk my beach and to understand my community turned out to be about something bigger. I come from avid walking parents, and after losing my own stamina from caring for both of them for the last years of their lives, I never thought about how much this walk would come to mean to me.

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In the panhandle, where I grew up, my father reminded me often about how lucky we were to be able to walk essentially 150 miles from our back yard in Panama City Beach to Pensacola. Florida's coastal access laws were renowned, and we fully appreciated them. The space was there for me to explore and learn, and it got in my bones very early in life.

Dad knew a thing or two about walking beaches. He set up a biological research station in 1959 and walked at least ten miles on the soft sand in pitch-black beaches of Tortuguero, Costa Rica, every night. Over the years, he turned down promotions -- "desk jobs," as he called them -- in favor of sticking with the field work that kept him active and learning.

Mom walked those beautiful shores of Panama City Beach what seems like every single day. Also ten miles. She had been a PE teacher and compulsively kept a log of her walking activities and nutrition for years. We'd joke about how much she wanted to donate her body to science.

I'll never know to what extent she was trying to outwalk the disease she suspected would come her way. Before the fear of dementia, she was focused on her cardiovascular health. Over time, her walks turned to falls and anxiety-ridden escapes from uncomfortable situations -- everything from overstimulating social settings or cracks in the sidewalks to the unfamiliar and scary surroundings of an assisted-living facility.

The week after they moved in, the managers called me. "We're afraid she will run out the front door and fall into one of our lakes. We can't have that. We have to move her into the dementia wing, which is locked."

Ogren women do not do well in confined environments. So when I moved into a condo in Coral Gables in 2000, you might say it was a huge change for me. Friends far away have one of two reactions about my Miami life: "Oh, you must love living in Miami with all the exciting things to see and those beautiful beaches." Or: "Oh, you must hate living in Miami with all those crowds, and how do you even get to the beach?" Neither is wrong, of course.

I used to nag my third-generation Miami-native husband, "Where's this neighborhood? Is that a neighborhood or city? How do I get there?" Only recently have I accepted that I just can't get

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around Miami-Dade like I'd like. While we live in an extremely walkable and accessible spot, adjacent to the University of Miami, just one block from one of 22 Metrorail stations, I have all but written off my goal of being an involved citizen of Miami-Dade and a friend to anyone further than a bike ride away.

Limiting my movement runs counter to my identity as a self-sufficient, independent, adventurous, spontaneous, and curious person. And what began as an itch became a full-body rash: "I just want to walk the beach."

After years of hobbling, I decided I was strong enough to walk and decided to set out from the northern tip of Dr. Von D. Mizell-Eula Johnson State Park on Day 1. I planned to arrive at South Pointe on Day 2. My ability to move forward in space had become critical to my well-being. Achieving a sense of freedom on this walk was my first priority. And I thought, if all went well, then I'll get to see so much that I've never seen before.

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