

A Mini Marcher

The unrelenting determination of a three-year-old boy

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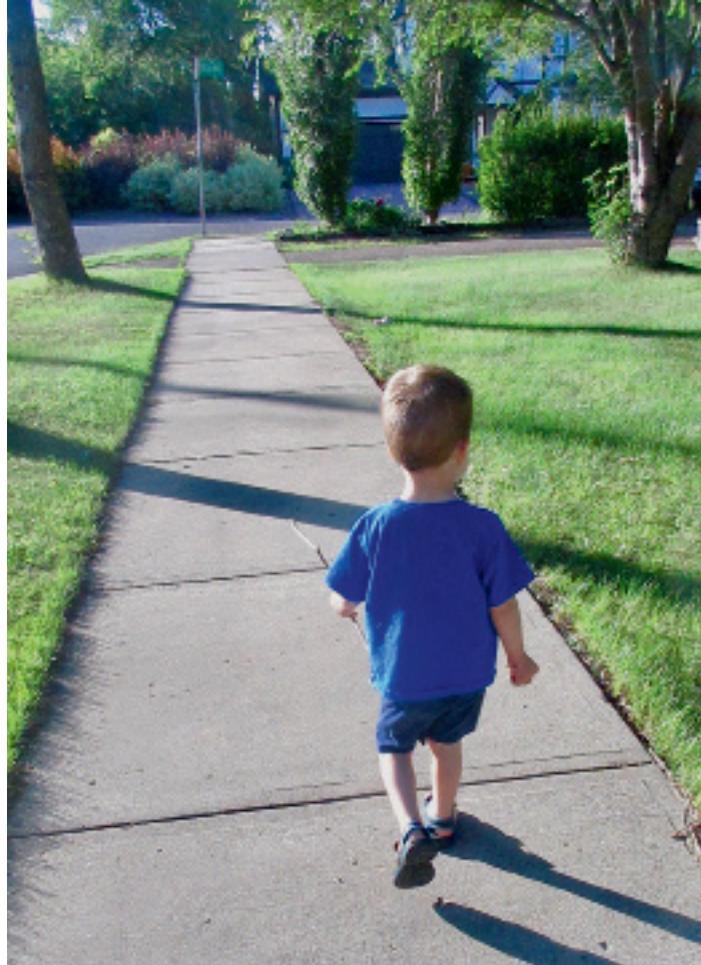
Each year, the Kidney Foundation of Southern Alberta hosts a 100-kilometre walk, over three days, called the Kidney March. In 2017, our son Sam's grandmother took part for the fifth time and we, as a family, decided to draw inspiration from this march to set our own goal of walking 100 kilometres in 100 days. With that in mind, we gave Sam the nickname of "Mini Marcher," and set out on our daily journey. The sun's early morning glow shined down on me as I followed my tiny toddler marching along the route, weaving on and off the park pathways as he collected pine cones and dandelions.

Most toddlers are known for their boundless energy, but Sam is a bit different. Only two years old at the time, he was already channelling his energy into promoting positive change via his march to raise awareness for kidney disease and living-organ donation.

A toddler walking

100 kilometres in 100 days? When we told our family and friends about Sam's quest, people met us with skepticism and shock. No one had heard of a two-year-old doing anything like this before, probably because no other two-year-old had ever attempted it, until Sam came along. It seemed very natural to my husband and me, because Sam had always loved long walks out in nature and we were simply following his natural passion.

When we first started walking with Sam in 2017, he loved his "kilometre of the day" and often had his shoes on before we could even put on our socks. By the final kilometres, Sam still couldn't get enough of it and we often had to cut him off at the two- or three-kilometre mark because he just wanted to keep going and going. He quickly became a fixture in our community, wearing his red "Kidney March" shirt and proudly walking along, with his pine cone bucket. As he



passed by local shops, store owners waved and popped out to say hello. They even handed Sam lollipops to enjoy while on his march. For someone so small, he's a surprisingly well-known figure in our town.

WHY KIDNEY DISEASE?

Coming from a long line of family members who have suffered from this disease, and many family members who have either received kidney transplants, been on dialysis or have donated kidneys, we knew it was the right choice. As kidney disease affects one in ten Canadians and 16 people are told their kidneys have failed

each day, it's a big issue that affects many Canadians and their families. Sam doesn't fully understand the concept he's walking for but when asked, he'll gladly show you where his kidneys are and maybe even tell you a bit about what they do, but one thing is for certain—he knows without a doubt that he's walking for his Granny, for his cousins, for his aunt and uncle.

It has already been well over 18 months (Spring 2017) since Sam's first walk, however, his journey is nowhere near over. Now almost four years old, he walked his 100 kilometres again in the summer of 2018, and is already thinking about

walking again in 2019 for a third straight year. This year in particular was very special, because other children across Canada joined in the journey and walked their own 100 kilometres. Despite being separated by cities and provinces, they joined due to their own personal connections to kidney disease and for their love of walking.

Sam's journey has now led him to incredible places. In 2017, he walked at the Alberta legislature with the Minister of Health, Sarah Hoffman, and was later introduced at

the Alberta Legislative Assembly to be honoured for his efforts. In 2018, his toddler movement expanded to group walks with the other mini marchers in the province, and led to a walk with Alberta's Member of the Legislative Assembly, Jessica Littlewood, to feed a local flock of sheep.

Summer 2018 also marked Sam's first year of fundraising and he happily surpassed his self-chosen goal of \$600 with the support of our local community. His journey was recorded, compiled into milestone videos and shared on the Kidney

Foundation's Facebook page. He became an immediate inspiration to those suffering with the disease. It's our dream for people to hear Sam's message and consider donating to the Kidney Foundation of Canada or maybe even consider becoming an organ donor themselves.

We hope to see a world where kidney disease is curable and no longer devastates so many families. Until that day comes, Sam will keep walking, because, to paraphrase the words of Lao Tzu: "Every great journey begins with a single step." ■

Clockwise from left: Sam on one of his many walks; Sam and his mom, Kirstin, sharing a happy moment; Sam pictured while clowning around in what has become known as the "famous Sam photo" taken at the Kidney Foundation office in 2017.

