

Extreme Challenge

Fundraising runners to tackle desert marathon

Donna Carrigan, a 25-year-old business consultant, has an unusual vacation planned next year. She's planning to run across the Gobi Desert in China, in an extreme running race called the Gobi March. It takes place over seven days, through some of the world's most gruelling terrain. Runners complete the equivalent of a marathon every day, while carrying their own packs, water, food and medical supplies.

It's a challenge, especially when you consider she's not a runner. In fact, Carrigan says, she "just started maybe two months ago."

The obvious question is, why?

"When I was 18, I was diagnosed with breast cancer," says Carrigan. "I remember being carted around the VGH looking at the posters on the walls . . . I remember being overwhelmed by it."

Hers was a rare case, given that breast cancer is most often diagnosed in women older than 50. And as such, her story had a happy ending, when the tumour turned out to be benign. "I just ignored it after that," she recalls. But the experience had a huge impact on her, she says, in that it gave her a sense, early in life, of "you know what, there are no guarantees."

That's why she wants to tackle something as challenging as the Gobi March. "I'm naturally good at a lot of things, but running I've never been good at." She figured, if she could tackle this, she could convey the sense that "anybody can do it."

With teammates Rob Mackay, a competitive runner, and Donald Peterson, they're hoping to raise \$25,000 for breast cancer research.

"We're attempting a first place finish," says Mackay, a University of Victoria employee and extreme runner. Mackay's mother, Gail, and grandmother, Amelia, both had breast cancer, and since Mackay has two young daughters, he's extremely aware of breast cancer's tendency to run in families—and all the more determined to do what he can about it. "In a lot of ways, this kind of race is really a metaphor for what people go through," he says. "In many ways, it takes the same attitude. You need to get going, get on with it. You need to beat this thing."

-A.G.



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