

2007: A walking odyssey: Foster Bibron, Frank Rowland and me, Joe

August 2006: An idea which had been floating round in my brain since my wife, Julie, had died very bravely suddenly got the kick needed to make the dream a reality. I wanted to do something in honour of my late wife and had recently met a very brave cancer survivor who gave me without knowing, the final push I needed. A walk from Adelaide to Melbourne was the only thing I wanted to achieve at that early stage.

My fitness level was not good, I was having daily radiation treatment at Flinders Private Hospital for prostate cancer, hence I had stopped training boxers earlier in the year, however the sheer 'guts' shown by the cancer survivor I had met spurred me into making a public commitment. This brought an immediate response from former National heavyweight boxing champion, Foster Bibron, who rang and said he would donate \$1000 as he had a good friend with prostate cancer. I had also declared I would raise funds for breast cancer as well as prostate. Two days later, Foster rang again and said instead of donating the money; he would walk with me and raise a lot more than he was going to give. Foster, having retired from boxing in 1972, was a fitness coach with Port Power Aussie rules team and a thorough gentleman.

Daily walks then became the routine, starting modestly and gradually increasing the distance. Not able to find a person willing to be 'the manager' I had to spend a lot of time sending emails and letters to all Cancer support groups and Lions Clubs in SA and Victoria. Eventually I started going to Gawler every fortnight on a Saturday to walk with Foster in the very hot weather. Many years ago I had been kicked by a bull whilst converting it to a steer and had spent a few days in Mt. Gambier hospital having the cartilage removed from my right knee as it was torn badly. Did not have any trouble until I started all the walking and from then I was in constant pain. Voltaren Rapid 25 did relieve it somewhat and would you believe as I replenished supplies along the way, every chemist supplied them free for me.

Foster had a Toyota Campervan which would be our support vehicle, but we did not have a driver. Recently starting work as the fund raiser at The Cancer Council was a young newlywed, Sarah Thornton. We went to lunch one day and when I told her we did not have a driver she quickly said, 'Dad will do that.'

I had a couple of meetings with 'Dad', Frank Rowland and found him to be very enthusiastic. Foster also made himself known to Frank and we decided on leaving on Easter Sunday, figuring the weather would be cooler then. How wrong we were!

We had two farewells in Adelaide. Channel Nine wanted us to leave from the City at 10am and that was shown on the evening news. There we had a large crowd of well-wishers. After they had finished with us we walked to AAMI Stadium, just the opposite way to Melbourne and at precisely 12.20pm we were interviewed and did a lap of the Stadium. Port Power were playing that afternoon.

Then it was off in earnest up the steep and winding Adelaide Hills. A former amateur boxer, Mark Coombes, came with us all the way the first day. Not allowed on the freeway of course so it was up the old highway and by the time we reached Hahndorf both Foster and I were 'rather tired'! Into a caravan park where Frank erected the two man tent for he and I to sleep in while Foster was to make room in the campervan and sleep there. I was in bed by 6.30pm, but did not sleep a wink for the second night in a row. Earlier, while eating our evening meal, a sandwich, Frank reckoned I had gone to sleep standing up! He is a retired minister of religion so I guess he would not lie!! Also I think he heard a few words he may not have been familiar with during the course of the expedition!

Up at 4.30am to find Foster had not slept very much also. We had a quick breakfast, Frank dismantled the tent and we were off walking again. Later in the morning we were joined by Frank's daughter, Sarah, who had been in Melbourne for a reunion and returned on Easter Sunday so she could walk with us on Easter Monday. Her husband Lee drove their vehicle and we then all had lunch at the Bridgeport Hotel in Murray Bridge. Here we met our hosts for the night, Elaine Presland and her husband who guided us to their two storey home before we set off walking again for the rest of the afternoon. Elaine came with us for that section and it was nice to enjoy her company. Lovely evening meal and off to bed. Donation from Lions also.

Up at 4.45am, quick breakfast and off to Coonalpyn from the spot we had finished the evening before. Uneventful walk but HOT.

After setting up our camp and having a snack tea, Frank and I went to the local pub to try and drum up some business. Only a few patrons, but the publican said he would raise some money and send it on. Have not been able to check whether he has or not yet.

Wednesday 11th April. Up early again, left at 6am. Snack lunch at Tintinara where we received \$60 from the shop assistant and a customer. Then headed for Keith. After setting up the camp we were picked up and taken to the Lions Club dinner meeting. We were presented with a cheque for \$200 at the end of a pleasant evening.

Left Keith very early for lunch meeting with Lions ladies at Bordertown. From memory I think we also received \$200. All money was posted to Sarah; hence I am not quite certain of amount.

Left very early again for Kaniva where Foster had friends, Stewart and Meg Sanders. They installed us in their lovely new home. Sure beat sleeping on the ground. Going to the toilet at night was a bit tricky when in the tent trying to get out of bed without falling on Frank. My dicky knee gave out at odd times and I managed to fall on my sleeping bag usually after doing a performance stumbling around which would have got me the lead role in Swan Lake! Also, Foster was able to tell us each morning how many times he had heard the tent zipper go 'ziiiiiiipppppp' through the night. He and I did not sleep well at all. We had a lovely bbq meal that evening with Meg and Stewart before falling into bed. Fos and I were up at 4.30am and had a bit of breakfast before heading off a bit later on Vic time as it was not light enough at our usual time when in SA. The traffic was horrendous and the long B Doubles actually stopped us dead in our tracks as they flew past within inches of us at times. Even Foster, much younger and bigger than me found he was also brought to a halt when they whizzed past.

Heading for Nhill on our seventh day on the road (and we often burst into the Willie Nelson song, ***On the road again***) we were met by local newspaper reporter, Leslie Gordon, who invited us to her home for lunch where we met some locals who gave us some donations. \$180 in all.

After setting up our tent we took off walking again, then came back for a 'meet the people' at the Golf Club. Received \$109 the result of a raffle. Then driven for dinner at Eril and Gordon's before bed.

Early start for Horsham next morning. Arrived in time to do some shopping. Foster's partner had packed enough supplies to see us through our first week and I then bought the next weeks food.

On the way to Horsham we stopped at a roadside stall for a free cup of tea. There the volunteer ladies gave us a note from a traveller from near where I live. He had read about us in our local throwaway paper but did not realise it was us when he sped by until the 'penny dropped' further up the road. '***Call into my business when you are home' the note read 'and I will give you \$500'***. I called yesterday (Saturday 28th) and he told me to come in Tuesday to get the cheque. None of the clubs responded to my appeals in Horsham. The prostate cancer president was an ex shearing contractor who when he heard my surname said 'I had a young bloke by that name working for me as a wool presser many years ago, but he was killed in an accident.' I was able to tell him it was my son, Peter. He then told me he was 80 odd years old and unable to help as his wife needed full time care.

The following day was spent on the road to Stawell where we again were refunded our money for dinner which was just as well as counter meals were the most expensive I have seen. \$27 for a rump steak was the cheapest. Was surprised to find the town a long way off the bypass road.

We were now having to leave camp a little later as it did not get light very early as we went further east. Left at 7am, heading for Ararat. There we sought out the president of the Lions Club as they had not responded to my letters. Neither had the cancer support people. The Lions Club chap promised to raise money in the next month after acknowledging he had received my letter but had ignored it. Had a better night sleep in this park for some reason.

Wednesday 18th April: Walked to Beaufort and arrived fairly early. Set up camp in the park which was behind the football oval. As usual we went to the pub for our evening meal and as usual by now the hotel was devoid of patrons. We guessed it was because of the shocking conditions due to lack of rain on every centimetre we had covered. The earth was brown and it was obvious the farmers had only kept their breeding stock. Lots of B Double transports loaded with hay passed us every day. At one small town outside a shop was a bale of Lucerne hay (just the old bale size) with a sign saying \$5 per bale!

Next morning we were to arrive in Ballarat for a 10am Civic reception so we had to drive in to be in time. Made up for it later by extra walking. The Mayor was away, so a councillor who was also a Senior Constable in the police welcomed us along with the local Federal member (Female) and lots of

other dignitaries. Morning tea there, then it was a walk in the Mall where the Lions Ladies were running a stall. That night we were taken to the Golf Club for dinner and \$775 was collected during dinner. One woman came in just to hand over some money she had collected at her work place as she had a friend with breast cancer. Of course, here we were staying with good friend Rhonda Tiller who I had known for many years. Rhonda lives alone in a huge house complete with billiard room which kept Frank and Foster entertained while Rhonda took me out to buy a new track suit, suitable for our imminent arrival in Melbourne, only a hundred kilometres away now.

Next morning we were up early to find Rhonda had breakfast all prepared. At 82 years old she is a bundle of energy and used to be one of our Regional Directors when we were involved with the Nutrimetics company. Terry and Sandy Grano from the Prostate Support Group invited us for a lovely lunch. We were staying in Ballarat for two nights and days to both recuperate somewhat and drum up as much business as possible. That night (Friday) after the evening meal we were taken to the footy club of which Rhonda's son in law, Shane Manly, is the president. It was their opening night for the season with introductions of all the players and officials. They still managed a sizable collection for our cause.

Saturday 21st: Up until now we had been lucky enough to have perfect weather although early on it had been rather hot and tiring. This day though it decided to rain and we got a little wet. We reached Ballan about 2pm and found the caravan park fully booked, mostly with permanents. While considering what to do we adjoined to an abandoned hotel which had been converted to a restaurant by an elderly Italian woman and her daughter. 'Moma' was at least 80 plus. They fed and amused us and whilst eating our toasted sandwiches, chief cameraman for my magazine, Amateur Boxer, Werner Kalin, then arrived with his wife Elizabeth. Werner suggested we should try Daylesford for accommodation, 30 ks out of our way so we took his advice and managed to get the last cabin available. Naturally we drove there. After brekky next morning we started walking back to Ballan to compensate for any driving we had done to meet appointments etc. Once again we had lunch with the Italian ladies in Ballan. They told us they had catered for a VERY big function the night before. We reckoned a big function would be about 10 people for this lovely couple.

Werner joined us again with his camera and took hundreds of photos as we walked. He is expert at walking backwards for some distance then would drive his car on ahead and start all over again.

This night we stayed at Bacchus Marsh and Werner shouted our evening meal in a pub where he knew the food was top class. It proved to be so.

All the time since training for the walk last year my knee was giving excruciating pain from where I had the cartilage removed many years ago when kicked by a bull. I managed to keep going with strong painkillers however Foster had to attend to some blisters on both feet from not wearing two pairs of socks in the early days of the walk. In Ballarat I had a visit to a podiatrist who was no better than Foster, however they gradually improved as Foster kept dressing them each night.

Monday 22nd April. Headed for Hoppers Crossing today to stay with Foster's daughter, Tracey, Simon and youngsters, Bianca and Sam. Werner again caught up with us on the road and took lots more photos, some of which can be seen on Mike Ryan's site, fighter-on line.com. Others will be inserted in here when Werner emails them to me. Lovely evening meal, shower and bed. This was another two storey home. Next day, Tuesday, we caught a train into the city to meet Jo Fairburn from The Prostate Cancer centre in Collins Street. She escorted us to a nice restaurant for lunch but was off to a meeting herself. Also she had to be at a fundraising golf day on the Thursday so could not attend our official welcome. Fortunately, Bernadette Clegg from the Breast Cancer centre at Camberwell was able to come for it. I had met these two delightful ladies last year when I made several trips to Melbourne to set things up after I had finished the radiation treatment.

On Anzac day Foster and I visited a nearby cemetery where he had a 17 year old daughter who had died from SIDS. Also a young child so we both have experienced tragedies in our lives. Although Tracey drove us there, we elected to walk home as we needed to keep active. Took us an hour. Rested for rest of day.

Thursday 26th April: Up at 5am. Tracey drove us into Melbourne as it was deemed too dangerous, although I figured it was not as dangerous as the open road where trucks tore past at seemingly ever increasing speed and trying to run us down. Most of the truckies gave us a good wave.

We met at the Cancer Council building before walking the last bit of our journey to the Exhibition Gardens to be greeted by John Famechon, Leroy Brown and Mark Zielinski and many

others from various cancer networks. Jemma from the Cancer Council welcomed us and as usual I had to respond. I don't think Foster or Frank were too shy. After all Frank had been a minister! We feasted on lovely sandwiches and cakes, champagne, orange juice and tea or coffee. It was great. Max Shub from the Prostate Support group was among the guests as was Bernadette Clegg from the Breast Cancer Support. I have known Mark (Ziggy) Zielinski and Leroy Brown for some time but unfortunately could not spend much time with them as when everyone dispersed it was time for Tracey to drive us back to her home. Zig and Leroy had promised last year to be there and they kept their word. Werner and I will go to their next boxing show to reciprocate.

Next morning Tracey drove me to Tullamarine airport quite early to catch a QANTAS flight to Adelaide, paid for by the Govt. agency I work as a volunteer for. I was reluctant to leave Frank and Foster but duty called. They arrived home Sunday afternoon.

Over the years I with Julie had visited many parts of the world and experienced many things. Without hesitation I would say this was the most rewarding experience I have ever had. Would I do it again? Yes, but I am now looking for a newer challenge, after my boxing bout with Father Dave Smith. This will be on the Channel nine today show in a few weeks to raise more money for the two very prevalent cancers. If anyone would like to donate to our cause, the address is Sarah Thornton, Fund Raiser, The Cancer Council. 202 Greenhill Road, Eastwood, SA 5064.

Thanks for taking the time to read this.