

Sivan

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Going Costal

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David Herz *Special to the Jewish Times*
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On the Fourth of July this year, most of us will enjoy a day off from work, maybe a picnic with friends and family, and probably some fireworks. Some of us may even fit a nice run into the leisurely day.

Jason Gross is also planning on going for a run that day, but his will last a little longer.

Jason
Gross

On that day, the 27-year-old Mr. Gross, who is single and lives in Washington, D.C., plans to start his Diabetes Run Across America. The run, which will raise money and awareness for diabetes research, is scheduled to begin in New York's Central Park and conclude approximately 170 days and 3,300 miles later on the Santa Monica Pier in Los Angeles. He plans to run 20-30 miles per day.

On April 3, a fund-raiser for Mr. Gross' endeavor, called the 2004 Jam for Diabetes, was held at the Royal Baltimore in Federal Hill. Organized by Baltimore-area friends and supporters of Mr. Gross, the event featured four local bands, and all proceeds went toward assisting his run and the American Diabetes Association.

A friend of Mr. Gross, Owings Mills resident David Waranch, 24, organized the fund-raiser.

"I approached Jason about having a fund-raiser in Baltimore and he loved the idea." Mr. Waranch said, "I have some friends in bands and they have family members who have diabetes, so they were really excited about being involved. The Baltimore community has been very supportive."

Mr. Gross, who says he quit his job at a trade association to prepare for the run, says he first began thinking about running across the United States two years ago after two of his friends biked cross-country.

"Their stories were so great, and I wished I could have joined them on the trip," Mr. Gross says, "but I don't really enjoy biking. The only thing I was really passionate about was running, so the idea of running across the country started to creep into my head."

Mr. Gross says he wanted to incorporate the run with a worthy cause. Diabetes, he says, was something that has affected him personally. His grandfather lost both legs and eventually died from complications of type II diabetes. Mr. Gross has an uncle with type II, and his best friend has type I.

When he graduated from the University of Buffalo a few years ago, Mr. Gross says he weighed more than 250 pounds. Given his family history and his inactive lifestyle, he says he knew his health was at risk. He began running and noticed that in addition to feeling better, he was losing weight. Today, he weighs 155 pounds and has competed in six marathons.

"Diabetes is such an epidemic today, and in so many cases it is preventable. It just made sense to make it part of the run," Mr. Gross says.

Says Tony Leongini, a market manager for the American Diabetes Association who is assisting Mr. Gross with his run: "Jason's weight loss is a remarkable thing. Obesity is such a prevalent health concern, and Jason is proof positive that a good diet and exercise can dramatically improve your health."

Mr. Leongini says he believes that Mr. Gross is the first person to attempt to run across the country on behalf of the ADA. Despite the enormity of the task, Mr. Gross' friends say they are not shocked by his desire to run across the nation for a charity.

"I can't say that I was surprised. He has the biggest heart of anyone I know," says Keren Mandell, who is a close friend of Mr. Gross and suffers from type I diabetes. "We [Mr. Gross' friends] were just like, 'That is incredible, we'll do anything to help you.'"

Mr. Gross, who became a bar mitzvah at his hometown temple in Buffalo, N.Y., says the support he has received from his friends and family has been overwhelming.

"The only reason I have been able to get this far is because of everyone's support," he says. "It's just been amazing. You know no matter what they may think about it, they have been behind me 100 percent."

For information about Mr. Gross' Diabetes Run Across America, check out www.diabetesrun.com.

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