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UB alum to run across the country to raise money for diabetes

By **DONNA BUDNIEWSKI**

Reporter Assistant Editor

In a bold move—and for a good cause—a UB alumnus is quitting his job sometime in April to prepare for a cross-country run to raise money and awareness for a disease that has reached near-epidemic proportions in the U.S.

Jason Gross, 27, who received a bachelor's degree in communication from UB in 1998, is determined to raise \$100,000 for the American Diabetes Association—a cause close to his heart.

Gross will leave New York City on July 4, passing through Buffalo in late July, for what promises to be at least a six-month journey across the U.S. If all goes as planned, he will arrive in Los Angeles sometime in December. The trip will take him through the South and West—the heart of the country.

His motivation for such a trek, he says, is the history of diabetes in his family—he lost a beloved grandfather to the disease—and the fact that for a time, his weight had spiraled out of control, also placing him at risk for diabetes.

"My grandfather, to whom I was very close, had both of his legs amputated and eventually died from complications brought on by Type II diabetes. I will never forget how he always kept his sense of humor, no matter what," Gross recalls. "I also have an uncle with Type II diabetes, so it is not a stretch to say diabetes runs in my



Jason Gross plans to run across the country this summer and fall to raise money for diabetes.

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family.

"When I graduated from UB in 1998, I weighed about 250 pounds and I have no doubt that if I hadn't done something, I would have likely developed Type II diabetes," he says. "I have since lost nearly 100 pounds and can't wait to start running (in July). One of my closest friends in D.C. has Type I (sometimes referred to as Juvenile Diabetes), and seeing what she has to go through on a daily basis amazes me."

While he admits that most people probably think he's crazy for wanting to run across the country, family and friends have been incredibly supportive and helpful in planning the trip.

Gross began running as a way to get in shape and changed his diet, although he says he doesn't believe in "dieting." A runner "for the pure joy of it," he has participated in at least six marathons and joined a running club soon after he graduated from UB and moved to Washington, D.C. Gross now works in Rockville, Md., and works as a membership manager for a trade association. He is frank about the toll of diabetes and the effects of a fast food diet.

"Especially as someone who was once obese, it makes me very sad that Type II diabetes has reached epidemic proportions in the United States—18 million Americans now have diabetes," he notes. "I think it is so important that people live healthier lives. It's hard in our society with super-sized portions and the easy availability of junk food, not to mention the ridiculously busy lifestyles we all keep. But in most cases, lifestyle changes can prevent diabetes," he says, adding that changes should be gradual so that they become a permanent part of a healthier lifestyle.

"Unfortunately, there isn't a quick fix or silver bullet; people simply need to adopt healthier lifestyles overall—this is the best way to combat Type II diabetes," he says.

Passionate about running, Gross says he's had the idea for a cross-country fund raiser for some time. He approached the American Diabetes Association this past summer and the organization was receptive to his idea.

"I might be naive, but I think the planning and fund raising will be harder than the run. I am raring to get out on the road"

Gross' training regimen consists of running about 40 miles a week for now, but he gradually will increase that to about 75-100 miles a week. During the run this summer, he hopes to average about 125-150 miles each week.

"I will probably break up the running each day, and I won't be racing (against) anyone—for these reasons I am confident that I will be able to make it," he says. "I think the biggest concern will be keeping my mind occupied while running for five or six hours a day.

"I have a support driver who will be with me who will keep an eye on me and make sure everything is going OK. He actually was the support driver for a man who ran across America in 1999," he explains.

For more information about the trip or to make a contribution, visit <http://www.diabetesrun.com>.

Gross, is fiercely optimistic, regardless of the challenges posed by such a venture. "I might be sadistic, but I love running in the heat. Bring it on," he says.

He offers some advice for UB students. "Though it's nearly impossible in school, make an effort to be healthy—the UB campus offers many opportunities to be active. I didn't take advantage of them in college, but I wish I would have."

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