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Running—and Raising Money for Diabetes—All the Way Across America

In college, Jason Gross was the guy who cleaned his plate—and everybody else's. His friends called him "Food" and "Big Guy." He tipped the scales at 250 pounds.

Six years later, sipping a mango tea at Caribou Coffee in Northwest DC, Gross wears a "Team Diabetes" T-shirt that hangs loosely; he shows no sign of his former bulk. At 5-foot-10 and 155, Big Guy is a misnomer.

The secret to his weight-loss success? Running. "I still love food," he says. "That's why I run so much—so I can eat what I want."

After graduating from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1998, Gross started going for short jogs to the end of his street in suburban Buffalo hoping to shed some of his bulge.

"Something clicked," says Gross, 28. "I wouldn't feel good if I missed a day."

When he moved to DC a few months later to find a job, he fell in love with the city's trails—and running past the lit monuments at night. Soon his jogs became long runs, and he joined the DC Road Runners, a local running club.

These days, with six marathons under his belt, Gross considers running "almost like a religion." Beginning July 4, he'll start a 3,300-mile pilgrimage from New York City to Los Angeles. He estimates that the trek, which only about 300 others have accomplished, will take six months. He plans on averaging 20 to 30 miles a day, which should take four to six hours. He'll rest one day a week. Though he's running alone, Gross will have two "support drivers" with him to do the routing and ensure that he's safe.

Gross says a few people have asked him, "Why the hell would you do this?"

He thinks his reasons are sensible. Sort of.

For one, he says, he's in a "quarter-life crisis. . . . So many people come here with a mission and are so passionate about their work," he says. "But I'm not sure exactly what I want to do with my life. At this point, I'm still young enough to do something like this."

He's been itching to make the run since 2001, when his two closest friends biked across America and regaled him with tales from the road. He also wants to raise awareness and money for the American Diabetes Association, which has endorsed his run.

Gross is familiar with diabetes, the disease in which the body does not produce or properly

"Giving diabetes a run for the money," as Gross puts it, has turned into a full-time job. In late April, he left his position as membership manager at the Association of Community Cancer Centers in Rockville to concentrate on raising money and training.

use insulin, through family and friends. His grandfather died from diabetes complications, an uncle has Type II, or adult-onset diabetes, and one of his best friends in Washington has Type I, or juvenile-onset diabetes. If Gross still weighed 250 pounds, he'd be a likely candidate for the disease, too.

"Giving diabetes a run for the money," as Gross puts it, has turned into a full-time job. In late April, he left his position as membership manager at the Association of Community Cancer Centers in Rockville to concentrate on raising money and training. He logged 255 miles of running in May, less than half the amount he'll need to average if he hopes to finish in five months.

He's not worried. "I'm doing it at my own pace," he says. Gross hopes to raise more than \$100,000 to benefit the ADA. To date, he's collected more than \$20,000.

"I'm proud that we've raised this much money," he says. "But we obviously still have a long way to go."

One friend designed his Web site for free. His roommates are letting him stay rent-free in their apartment off Logan Circle. "I'm basically living on the couch, which I'm not complaining about," he says. "The price is right."

For training advice, Gross contacted Nick Baldock, an Englishman who ran across the United States in 1999. Baldock referred him to Dave Boatman, his "support driver" for the run. In exchange for a plane ticket from England, Boatman volunteered the same service for Gross. The two have never met, but they talk weekly. Paul Bowers, a childhood friend of Gross's will serve as a second driver.

"We'll be depending on the kindness of strangers," says Gross, who hopes to raise more money along the way as more people find out about him. In the weeks leading up to his departure, nerves are giving way to excitement. The journey this far has been fun, he says. And he looks forward to its end.

"It's not something I'll ever do again," he says. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime type thing."

For more information, or to make a donation, visit www.diabetesrun.com.

—JULIA FELDMEIERS

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