Instilling a passion for walking

Active San Diego

By Doug Williams, Special to the U-T 6 a.m. June 23, 2015

Walkabout International founder Larry Forman at La Jolla Shores before he leads a 3-hour long walk up Mount Soledad. Photo: Rick Nocon

This story is part of a bi-weekly series focusing on San Diego County residents and their commitment to fitness, health and staying active.
Subject: Larry Forman

Age: 60-something  |  Residence: Del Mar

His story

He grew up in Rhode Island and has followed a path created by his surroundings and interests. He’s a lifetime fan of the Boston Red Sox and began studying and working with computers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology while a high school student. He then received degrees (including his doctorate) at Brown, the University of Chicago and University of California, Berkeley. For more than 30 years he’s taught computer and information sciences at San Diego City College where he’s chairman of the Computer Information Systems Department.

All the while, he’s been walking, a passion set in motion by his parents.

“On Sunday, we’d have a nice meal and then we’d go for a nice, leisurely, two-hour walk,” says Forman. “And this was before the fitness craze. So we would end up walking basically from our town to the next town. As we were walking back, cars would stop. Friends or relatives would ask us, ‘What happened to your car? Did it break down?’”

His parents simply liked to walk. They wanted to explore and connect with their community. Soon, their son did, too.

Decades later, Forman walks around San Diego, across the nation and overseas. He remains fit and full of energy. In 1977 he founded the walking club Walkabout International in San Diego. He’s led 15 walking tours of Switzerland. He’s race-walked in marathons, but also led slow, group strolls through La Jolla to every ice cream and frozen yogurt shop.

“I’m an eclectic walker,” says Forman. “Some of my walks are fast, some of my walks are slow, some are historical, some are hysterical.”

His daily walks are such a part of his life that, when asked if he looks forward to them, he says: “Do you look forward to breathing? It’s a natural extension.”

Walkabout

When he moved to San Diego in the 1970s to work for the Naval Ocean Systems Center in Point Loma, Forman would take long, evening walks. He decided to find out if others enjoyed “the odd activity of nocturnal walking,” and took out personal ads for a night group walk. On March 17, 1977, about a dozen people joined him for a night stroll. At the end, somebody asked, “When are we going to do it again?” Monthly night walks then evolved into more and varied walks. He estimates Walkabout (walkabout-int.org) has led 30,000 walks since. The group conducts about 1,000 free walks each year. Walkabout has had as many as 1,000 regular participants.

Distance and speed
Forman used to lead a walk along San Diego’s scenic drive (designated by a seagull sign) during America’s Finest City Week. The route (close to 60 miles) extends from the Embarcadero in the south to UCSD in the north and includes Mission Bay, Old Town and Point Loma. He and just a few of the hundreds who started would complete it in about 17 hours. When he walked marathons, he could motor along at a 10½-minute pace.

**Fitness regimen**

He walks every day. He calls it a complete exercise. “If you swing your arms, then you’re using virtually every muscle except those associated with your mouth,” he says. “And if you walk with someone, you exercise that.” He jokes his only other exercise is reading: “I turn pages.”

**Motivation**

Forman walks not just for physical fitness, but for the mental, psychological and emotional fitness he gets from rambling. “I kind of look at walking like how someone looks at a piece of sculpture,” he says. “How do you actually experience the sculpture? You walk around it.” He quotes William Blake, too, as his explanation: “To see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wildflower; hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour.”

**Diet**

He adopted a vegetarian diet, with some fish, while sharing a house (and cooking duties) with students when working on his doctorate. “I found after eating the usual meat dish, it was hard to resume my Ph.D. studies, so I wanted lighter fare,” he says. “When it was my time to cook, I chose lighter items.” He’s stuck with it and now says there are even more “compelling reasons” for a vegetarian or plant-based diet. “It is very healthy and economical and good for the environment,” he says.

**Favorite walks**

Just about anywhere. Recently he led a walk from La Jolla Shores to the top of Mount Soledad. On a recent weekday, he planned a walk through the canyons of the Torrey Pines State Reserve Extension, down to the beach, north to Dog Beach. From there he went past the Del Mar Fairgrounds and San Dieguito estuary before heading up through Crest Canyon and into residential areas. “That’s just one local walk that’s really exquisite and that hardly anyone knows about,” he says.

**Where not to walk**

“Some places, like Rancho Santa Fe, you need a visa to walk through,” he says. “If you’re not a resident, then there’s a problem. I’ve actually led some walks there where the security people stopped me and asked me to leave.”
**Fitness advice**

He says fitness is “fit-necessity” to maintain physical, mental and emotional fitness. If people wake up “with an energy, a sense of vitality, an awe-inspiring appreciation for the beauty of the cosmos,” then they’re doing something right. If not, they need to find an activity to fit into their lives.

**Guilty pleasures**

He has a list: chocolate, dark chocolate (especially from Chuao Chocolatier) and New York style pizza.