

Canadians running and even pushing shopping carts across country, but it's hard to get noticed after Terry Fox

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Michael Tutton, The Canadian Press

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Canadians are running, biking and even pushing shopping carts across the country for various compelling causes this summer, but it's often a struggle to be noticed in the post-Terry Fox era.

Trekkers still draw inspiration from Fox's 1981 one-legged run in his attempted Marathon of Hope, which ended when his cancer that had taken one leg recurred in his lungs and resulted in his death.

FileTerry Fox.

But as the years have passed, the journeys are often more solitary, attention from media outlets more sporadic, and the need for carefully calibrated marketing has intensified.

There are also a lot more people doing it.

"It's hard because it's almost like a competition," Eileen Zheng, who has herself crossed paths with a number of other people making the trek, said of the effort to raise money in a cross-country ride.

Zheng rode her bicycle into New Brunswick this week, raising money for the Canadian Transplant Association and continuing her efforts to encourage 1,000 registrations for organ donations by the end of this year.

Nova Scotian Chris MacDougall set out on his bicycle on July 24 with the goal of raising \$1 million for the Beatrice Hunter Cancer Research Institute in memory of his son Charlie.





Supplied Eileen Zheng.

The 62-year-old owner of a Tim Hortons franchise said at this point he will “be satisfied by hundreds of thousands of dollars,” and is having to make a rapid study of social media campaigns and reaching out to personal business networks if he hopes to hit his goals.

His son had dreamed of becoming a biochemist and research scientist. Instead, Charlie was diagnosed with osteogenic sarcoma, the same bone cancer that Fox had, and after an exhausting and successful initial treatment, the cancer recurred and took the 14-year-old’s life just after Christmas in 2004.

The voice of the businessman still breaks as he talks about his lost child, and his desire to make “Charlie’s ride” something that will help others receive improved treatments.

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“I find when you’re on the bike ... you think about everything,” he said. Painful memories come back of his son being treated for one of several life-threatening infections, of pumps constantly beeping, of chemotherapy that led to the boy’s constant coping with nausea.

At the end of rides, sweaty and tired, MacDougall’s niece has him go on his computer and write down his reflections and send photos of the day. He’s learning the art of creating a narrative that readers tie into.

Zheng said the key is to find a group of Canadians who are particularly drawn to the illness or issue, often due to a personal experience with friends and family.

The 28-year-old woman — who has raised about \$12,000 to date — said she’s had the most success with people who have known someone who needed a transplant.

The Marathon of Hope A June 29, 1981 file photo of Terry Fox during his run across Canada to raise money for cancer research.

“You have to touch the right people just by talking, and sometimes it gets a little bit repetitive and a little bit boring

but you just have to keep talking and let people know,” she said.

Along her journey, she’s crossed paths with trekkers such as Brad Firth, also known as “Caribou Legs,” an ultra marathoner who runs in support of missing and murdered aboriginal women, and Martin Bauman, who was also biking across Canada to raise money for mental health.

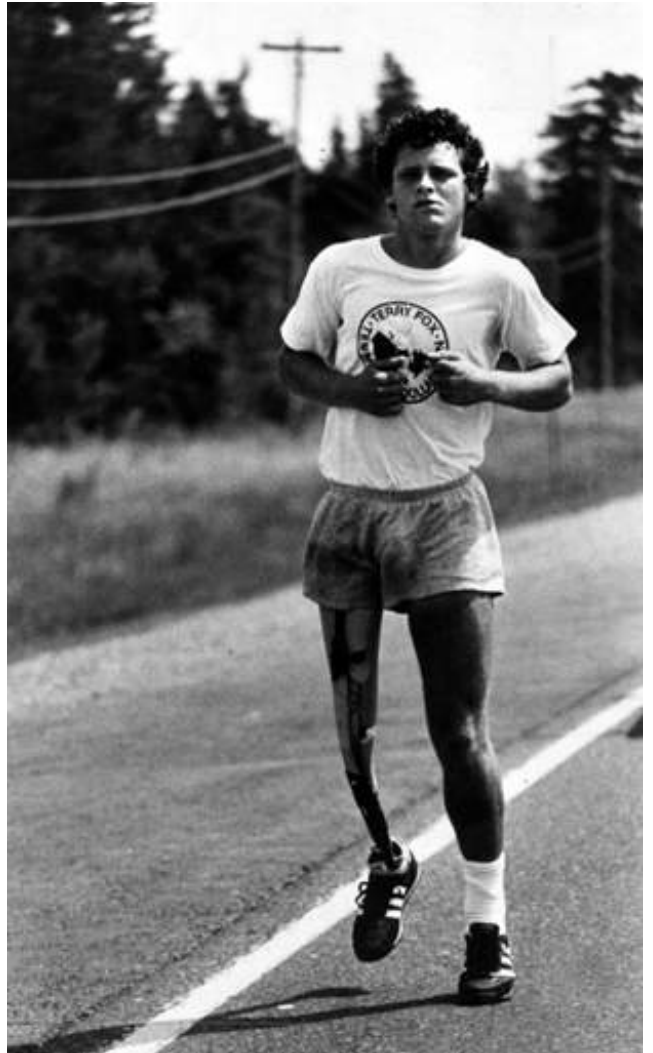
Then there is Joe Roberts, who is pushing a specially designed shopping cart across the country to raise money and awareness for youth homelessness.

He’s raised \$80,000 and has a goal of raising \$17 million, or 50 cents from every Canadian and raising awareness about youth homelessness.

“Fundraising is always hard. You’re competing in a sound-bite, distracted ... world,” he said.

The key is to find a way to tie the public into the message, a process that the resident of Barrie, Ont., researched by interviewing past cross-country treks, such as former Olympian Clara Hughes’ “Big Ride” for mental health awareness.

“We had four-and-a-half years of planning. We found out the framework and how they did it and how we could replicate that success on a shoestring budget,” he said.





Tyler Anderson/National Post/Olympian Clara Hughes takes off from Maple Leaf Square on a cross country ride to raise awareness about mental health in Toronto, Ontario, March 14, 2014.

He's planned hundreds of community events aimed at bringing out mayors, senior politicians and local media as cheques are cut and handed out by unions and businesses. On Thursday, he walked into Fredericton accompanied by the provincial minister of Social Development.

"The key is to find a way to activate the population. If you don't do that, you're just another lonely person on the highway with a cause," he said.

"You can't just walk across the country with the Terry Fox glory mentality and expect people to come running out of their driveways with \$20 bills. You have to tell the story, you have to build the momentum and get it to the ... tipping point."

Still, for many of those on the road, often the journey itself becomes a transforming experience — and goals shift towards making small changes in the hearts and minds of some Canadians.

"Even if I touch one person and one person's life is changed, that's all I want," said Zheng.

Back in Calgary, MacDougall climbs back on his bike and begins the daily 80-kilometre journey, pumping through hills, bugs and cross winds in hopes Canadians will start to hear of his quest.

"There's phenomenal research being done, it's just struggling to get funds," he said. "Maybe in 10 years time the cancer that Terry Fox had and that Charlie had might be history."