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GEELONG'S VOICE FOR 176 YEARS

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JOHN'S FEET OF ENDURANCE

IT took nine months and eight pairs of shoes for Geelong's John Olsen to walk 5800km across the nation in a fight against the disease that killed the woman he loved: **P7**



HE DID IT!

P5



HORROR ON BOURKE ST




**5800KM
WALK**

Feet of endurance inspired by love

John Olsen recovers from his epic journey across Australia.
Picture: GLENN FERGUSON

Shane FOWLES



WALKING the endless road has left John Olsen with a knee that needs replacing, a visible limp and infected toes.

But after basically covering the length and width of Australia, the 65-year-old's ailments are the least of his concerns.

The Geelong man has just returned home for the first time since March last year, after completing an incredible 5800km solo odyssey on foot.

His adventure saw him leave Cape York — the country's northernmost point — on April 3 last year.

Just over nine months later, he stared across the Indian Ocean from Cape Leeuwin, in the southwest corner of the Western Australia mainland.

Alongside him was 'Wilson', a trolley that carried up to 200kg worth of supplies that doubled as his only constant companion.

In his heart was his late partner Vida Brazionis, who had provided the grandfather with the inspiration to take on the challenge.

"I'm a bit of sceptic but I couldn't help but think sometimes she was out there giving me a hand every now and then," Mr Olsen said.

Ms Brazionis had died in 2014 from leukodystrophy — a degenerative genetic disease that has no cure.

The walk, supported by the Corio Bay Lions Club, aims to raise \$100,000 to provide support to families affected by the disease and fund research.

"I've completed the physical side of it, but I still feel that the job's not been done until we get to our target," Mr Olsen said.

The impacts of that physical challenge are obvious.



"So that's why I walk — because there is lots of kids who can't."

JOHN (PICTURED WITH HIS LATE PARTNER VIDA)

Mr Olsen churned through eight pairs of shoes and 32 tyres on 'Wilson'.

He lost more than 30kg, gained an unruly beard and further injured a "buggered" knee that sees him walk with a distinct limp.

Before Mr Olsen even set out, a surgeon told him he would need an artificial knee.

"He said 'you won't be walking across Australia with one of them,'" Mr Olsen said.

His injury and unseasonably bad weather combined to slow his progress.

Delays and detours were common — 200km had to be added to the trip in the first half due to flooding. A planned

five-month trip turned into a nine-month pilgrimage.

Through it all he was mainly alone, with no support crew.

"Mentally, I always like to think I'm one of the old explorers, that I'm out there by myself, battling my own demons and fighting the elements," Mr Olsen said.

"It sounds weird but I find I cope better that way.

"I don't mind my own company but I could never be a full-time hermit."

It was a philosophy that served him well on two earlier transcontinental fundraising walks.

He covered Cape York to Tasmania's South West Cape

in 2004, before making the west to east journey in 2008.

But Mr Olsen never got into the same comfortable groove on his latest trek.

"It was harder mentally this time," he said.

"I think it's because I didn't have Vida to come home to this time. I didn't feel as if there was a goal at the end of it.

"The longer it was taking, the more mentally I didn't feel at ease as much as I did on the first two walks."

He found practical and social support through local Aboriginal communities, who told him where to find water and gave him some bush tucker tips.

When he arrived in townships, he would set up camp at roadhouses and replenish his supplies, with 'Wilson' able to carry a month's worth of food.

"I don't sleep in a bed while I'm doing these walks. I've got a little tent and a very small mattress," he said.

Not satisfied with reaching Cape Leeuwin, Mr Olsen kept going. He walked a further 300km-plus to Perth.

His rationale for what he does is as simple as it is heart-warming.

"Kids who have leukodystrophy, they may never have that chance," he said.

"So that's why I walk — because there is lots of kids who can't."

For now, the long-term Lions Club member is looking forward to his first shave in more than nine months.

But the drive to raise \$100,000 will not slow him down.

Despite a vow that his third epic trip would be his last, a cheeky glint in his eye suggests he's considering another remarkable quest.

"For the moment, I'm saying no (not again). But I can't see why not," he said.

Visit: leuko.org.au/thelongwalk. To donate: direct debit BSB 033679 / Acc: 294455.



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