

INCIDENTAL LIVES



MICHAEL
TSAI

Parkinson's patient's trek proves feet of strength

Chris Dacus' journey of 1,080 miles started not with the proverbial one step, but with niggling internal voices that kept saying "don't" and "can't" and "better not."

For Dacus, 53, the messages were a direct refutation of how he had always lived his life. A successful landscape architect and recreational endurance athlete, Dacus embraced challenge as a matter of growth, but nothing compared to the daily struggles he faced after developing Parkinson's disease more than a decade ago.

The physical symptoms were daunting — "It feels like you're 90 years old," Dacus said — but not as insidiously disabling as the fear and doubt that they bred.

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"The little voices in my head kept telling me that I can't do things that I liked to do, like surfing," he said. "They kept telling me that I couldn't try things because I have Parkinson's."

Dacus' response would be an affirmation of life powerful enough to silence those voices for good.

Dacus retired last year after worsening rigidity in his arms and hands made it too difficult to write, type and draw — all essential functions for his work. But he wasn't willing to retreat into seclusion and disability.

Some years earlier Dacus had completed the Camino del Norte, the challenging Christian pilgrimage route that extends hundreds of miles along the northern coast of Spain. Now with ample time on his hands, he fixed his attention on a significantly more challenging goal: walking from the Pyrenees on the Spanish-French border to Rome.

"I'm not a person that typically thinks about the difficulty of a task," Dacus said. "I thought I'd just meander across Europe. I honestly didn't know if I'd finish, but I figured I could always get a bike and bike the rest if I had to."

Joined by friends Maya and Clive Cowell, Dacus set off from Pagnac in the Auvergne region of France on April 14. Each day was a challenge to

Please see DACUS, B3

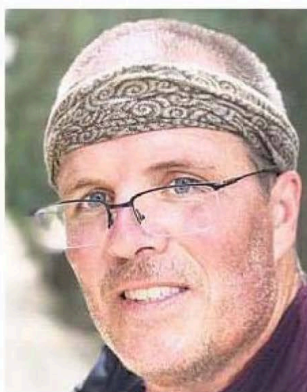
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Continued from B1

properly manage his regimen of medications and adapt to his body's reactions with strategies recommended by his physical therapist.

Thus, when Dacus' right leg dragged, for example, he did high steps and long steps to compensate. He estimates that he covered nearly 20 miles walking backward.

"I was stumbling and falling forward, but I didn't stop," he said. "We did 12 to 14 hours of walking a day. About a thousand times along the way, I said to myself that I should stop, that this was ridiculous. My back hurt. My shoulders were tight. But I never stopped."



COURTESY PHOTO

Chris Dacus

Dacus completed the last three weeks of the trek by himself, pushing forward in 95-degree heat with few fellow travelers along the route.

On June 25, three months and 2.4 million steps after he started, Dacus ended his journey at the Vatican, a personal moment of triumph that reduced him to tears.

Dacus said he hopes his experience will inspire others with Parkinson's to think positively and to engage life without fear.

"About 1 percent of the population has Parkinson's, but we don't see them because a lot of them don't leave the house," he said. "It's understandable because when you have Parkinson's you feel fragile. Everything is difficult and tricky. But you have to commit to a couple of hours every day. You have to leave the house every day. You have to stretch and exercise. It's the price of admission."

Based on years of research and his own personal experience with the disease, Dacus formulated a 10-point "Get Moving Plan" for people with Parkinson's which is available at his website, movingparkinsons.com.