

The Good Time Girls

Our Story Oxfam Trailwalker 2007

By Catherine Clark

Hi Everybody

Well... we did it!! We walked 100km in 29hours and 18 minutes!!! I don't think I could begin to explain to you all how it felt when we actually crossed that finish line. It was THE most incredible feeling of accomplishment, pride, relief, satisfaction, happiness, and complete and utter exhaustion all combined into one! But let me start at the beginning...

Team Recruitment

It all started with an innocent forwarded email in January from one of my friends. I thought, "hmmm, looks quite interesting... 4 people walking in a relay for 100km, raising money for Oxfam.. quite a noble thing to do really...25km each.. that's doable... can't be that hard... I wonder if anybody else from work is keen?"... Oh how naive I was!!

So I sent the email on to my work colleagues, not really expecting to get much of a response, placed a printed copy on the staffroom table, and then didn't really give it much thought for the rest of the day really. It wasn't until later that night, when I actually got time to read the email properly, that I read the following sentences: "This is not a relay. Your team of four starts together, sticks together, and finishes together". What the...? All four of us had to walk 100km in under 36 hours...non-stop.... Yeah right!! As if I would voluntarily sign up for that!!! So after reading that, as far as I was concerned, there was no way I would be doing it. I actually slept quite well that night too (little did I know then, that it would be my last decent sleep for the next 4 months!).

The next morning as I strolled into work, I was greeted eagerly by Monique from Customer Services. "Yip I'm keen", she called to me, "I'm definitely in. Who else is?" I was a bit blown away to be honest!

"Are you serious?" I replied.

"Definitely – It'll be fun!" she assured me. And before I knew it, before I could even stop myself, the next words out of my lips were, "O.K. – you're on. Let me see who else I can muster up". And still to this day I have no idea what on earth possessed me!?!

Right – so then there were two. We needed four. As I sat at my desk pondering who I should ask first, my phone rang. It was Diane, our Dispatch Manager. "I'll do it", she exclaims, "is anybody else interested?". At this point my mind had actually drifted to our boss. I was wondering if he had any idea that he had not one, but three employees who were clearly insane? So after a quick chat with Diane, it was decided that she would ask Marinda, our Pharmacy Manager. Later that afternoon Diane reported back that Marinda wasn't keen.

"Why not?" I demanded.

"Well Marinda is a very direct person", she said, "so I just gave it to her straight – just the facts. 100km in 36hours".

"So what did she say?" I asked.

"Get real. No way. I'm not walking 100km".



Diane, Catherine & Marinda



“Right”, I said, “leave her to me”. So off I went, charging downstairs to corner Marinda in her office.

There she was, busy at her desk. I took a deep breath and calmly approached her, smiling sweetly.

“Hi Marinda” I cooed.

“Hi Catherine” she answered suspiciously, looking at me out of the corner of her eye, knowing full well why I was there.

“So Diane tells me that you’re not keen to do the walk? That’s not like you to turn down a challenge”.

“Catherine”, she exclaimed, “it’s 100 bloody kilometers!”

“So?”

“So? I can’t walk 100kms in 36 hours!”

“Why not? That’s less than 3km per hour. You can easily do that”.

“Yeah, but not for 36hours!” she replied.

“Sure you can”, I encouraged, “with lots of training we’ll all be able to do it. There are people in their 70’s that can do it.. so there’s no reason why we can’t do it! Come on Marinda, it’ll be fun”.

“Let me think about it” she mumbled. I walked out of that office knowing that I had her!

The next morning Marinda confirmed her place in the team. “Catherine, I think there’s a good reason why you work in marketing” she said.

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Well, yesterday Diane gave me the Dispatch version of events. She was very direct, in and out, with a quick product turn-a-round. Then you came into my office and gave me the sales and marketing version. Before I could stop myself you had convinced me to buy something I didn’t really want!”

And so “The Good Time Girls” were formed. Monique, Diane, Marinda and I.

Shoes, Glorious Shoes!

So now we had a team.. four women with the best of intentions... but now what? How much training were we supposed to do? What sort of gear would we need to buy? How were we going to raise enough money to meet the fundraising quota?... oh so many questions. So at this point our natural womanly instinct just kicked in... if in doubt, buy shoes! So we did!

Our first official team meeting took place that Saturday morning down at the Takapuna Shoe Science. We figured that clearly we were going to need a couple of pairs of decent training shoes – so the shoe store really was a logical place to start... honestly! I’m not sure that our bank accounts have ever really figured out what happened to them that fateful day, but we walked away from that store with a couple of pairs of shoes, copious pairs of socks, a couple of free Shoe Science t-shirts, and big smiles on our faces (Marinda even went home with a couple of puppies from the pet shop next door too!)

So now we were all set. We were ready to start walking.

The Training

“If you are seeking creative ideas, go out walking.

Angels whisper to a woman when she goes for a walk”.

- Raymond Inmon

12 weeks exactly until D-Day. Wow that’s close! Fortunately for us, Diane is super organised. Before Monique, Marinda and I could even contemplate where to begin, Diane had whipped up a 12 week training schedule, hunted out maps of bush walks, and spoken to friends of friends who’d competed



The new shoes!



Our first training walk.

*Monique, Catherine, Marinda,
& Diane*



Marinda & Diane on a training walk in Tanpo

in this event last year, and was telling us exactly what to expect. So of course it was a unanimous decision that from this day forward Diane would now be known as the team navigator! (Well – she bought it on herself really, didn't she?).

So the schedule was set. 5.30am starts three mornings per week (and yes Marinda, we get it... 5.30am is when we start walking... not when we show up... boy we sure learnt that the hard way!), and kiss goodbye to your weekends... from now on Saturday's and Sunday's were spent hiking around the greater Auckland City, Waiheke Island, and the Waitakere Ranges. A social life you say? What's that? Eat, sleep, work and walk. That was the daily, weekly and monthly routine!

I must say that I now get real satisfaction when I pan my eye around the Auckland skyline. From the North Shore right down to Onehunga, we've climbed the majority of those volcanoes (some more than once)! I wonder how many people can claim that?

It was a sad day for our team when a few weeks into the training Monique decided not to continue on. Monique had contributed so much of her time, effort and money to the team, and her vibrant personality was really missed. I have to say Monique, that I honestly don't think I would have committed to this walk if it wasn't for you. Your enthusiasm right from Day 1 was contagious! Thank you from all of us.

After a panicked phone call to the Oxfam HQ, it was confirmed that we would still be able to enter the event with a team of three. Phew! However it would mean that there would be no room for injury on the day... if somebody has to drop out, then all of us would have to drop out – unless we could convince another team to adopt the remaining two people. Right then... so that was that. There was no room for injury, therefore we were determined that there would be no injuries! As Marinda says, "pain is all in your head"!

And so the training continued. Towards the end of the schedule we were walking over 100km each per week. For me, I think the hardest *physical* training we did started one Friday night after a full day at work. We walked from about 6pm until about 1am around Devonport and Takapuna. We then had a "sleep-over" at Diane's house for about 2 hours, then walked around Birkenhead and Northcote from about 4.30am til 1pm. The purpose of that training was to get the body used to walking when we were exhausted (... note to self... I think it worked!!!).

Then the hardest *mental* training for me was one Sunday when we walked around the cliff tops from Bartrum Bay to Bethells Beach (after walking for 12 hours the previous day on Waiheke Island). I am absolutely terrified of heights, so walking on a sheep's track with a 100ft drop to the ocean on one side of you and a steep cliff rising up on the other side of you, lots of slippery loose gravel and mud, gorse, and nothing to grab onto if you fell... well I'm sure you get the picture! Lets just say that by the time we made it to Bethells, there were tears! But we did get some stunning photos though!

One of the most common questions our friends and family would ask us was "So what on earth do you girls talk about all day? Surely you must run out of things to say?". My answer to that... "Ummmm, hello? We're female! There's always *something* to talk about!"



Views from Waiheke Is.



Exhausted after 12hrs of training on Waiheke Is.



The views from the hair-raising Bartrum to Bethells walk

The Sponsorship and Support

While we were busy preparing our minds and bodies to accomplish this great feat, the real reason why we were actually doing this in the first place was always top of mind (and no... reducing the size of our backsides wasn't the only reason!!). We were raising money and awareness for a worthy cause.

We were doing this to help Oxfam's work with some of the poorest people around the world. I was shocked to discover that a child dies of poverty every three seconds. That means that in the 36 hours we had to complete this challenge, 43,200 infants will die needlessly. That's the equivalent of every New Zealand toddler wiped out in a single weekend from a completely preventable cause.

The biggest cause of all these deaths is not something as complicated to cure as cancer. It is quite simply dehydration. Children who do not have access to clean water get diarrhoea, and if left untreated, slowly wither away. As a team we have raised nearly \$5,000. In an emergency like Tsunami



or the recent earthquake in Kashmir, this could give over 3,000 people life-saving clean safe water. We have you to thank for that.

The support, donations and encouraging messages that we have received were just phenomenal. They really did keep us going through our training and on the big day itself.

We also owe a huge thank you to our corporate sponsors. Bryan and Lya French from the “Outdoorsman Headquarters Rotorua”. They provided our team and entire support crew our fantastic jackets which kept everybody toasty warm in the freezing Taupo weather! Thank you – they were greatly appreciated by all!!

Another big thank you to Tim and Jacquie from “Jacquie Dale’s Real Nutrition”. During the months of training Marinda, Diane and I had a standing fortnightly appointment with Tim and Jacquie to monitor our nutritional status, making sure we were eating enough, getting enough protein, developing muscles etc. Thank you so much for your support and advice... but I never want to eat another protein bar in my life!!!

Our final corporate sponsor to whom we owe thanks is “Clinicians”. Not only were we able to consume copious essential vitamins and minerals, but you generously covered the cost of our entry fee and paid for the hire of the campervan for the weekend. Thank you so much!

And finally a big thank you to our infamous Support Crew. We seriously would not have survived with out you guys! To Marinda’s husband Jan Van Staden, and children Isabel and Johan, and Diane’s partner Richard Monteith – thank you so much for your chauffeuring duties. For all of those weekends that you would drop us off in the middle of nowhere, and then pick us back up again (often in the middle of the night too!) – thank you. I know it definitely wasn’t easy on all of you. And then on the big day(s) the support crew was joined by my parents, Wally and Juliet Bain, Marinda’s friends, Philip and Dorlé van der Westhuizen, Diane’s sister and family, Christine Nash and wee Henry, and Graeme Hogan, our company General Manager. Wow what a crew you guys were!

There were 7 check points around the course, and every time we came stumbling in, we were greeted by cheers and warm smiling faces, hot food, drinks, massages, foot baths and just general warmth and encouragement. You kept us focused and took all of the stress and thinking out of it for us. All we had to do was walk. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

D-Day!

So this is it... It’s finally here. This is what all the hype as been about. In just 36hrs time it will all be over and we can re-claim our lives!!

It was nearly 8am and we were nervously taking our place in the start chute in the Taupo Domain, freezing cold, watching the helicopter buzz around and around overhead – drowning out the guy up front with the microphone.

We were surrounded by hundreds of other people, apparently 255 teams entered in total! We were all watching the big clock count down, joining in on the chorus of “ten... nine... eight... three... two... one WOOHOO” – a big cheer erupts, horns beep, party poppers go off, and we all wave farewell to our support crew as we charge off over the starting line. One hundred kilometers... here we come!!

We were so lucky with the weather that weekend. Apparently the year before it was torrential rain! We only had a bit of drizzle on the first afternoon, and a bit of wind to contend with – but it could have been much much worse!

So the first leg was only about 15km and we walked around the Huka Falls and the Craters of the Moon. We had scheduled to be arriving at the first check point at about 11.30am... and we were actually ahead of schedule. However we were dead last!! Of all the hundreds of people competing that weekend, we were the last team to enter the check point. For us, that was a real “psych out”. We knew that we had calculated correctly the pace that we would be able to maintain for the entire 100km, and we had worked out exactly how long each leg should take us if we wanted to achieve our personal goal of completing the walk in under 30 hours. But still, we were last!!! We are three very



The crew enjoy a hearty breakfast while waiting for the walkers



Mum giving me a shoulder rub



Graeme’s all set to join us on the 7th leg



Now how does this thing fit together?



Nervously waiting at the start



Action shot!



Bliss! Do I really have to get out of this chair?



Marinda in her element!



Blisters!



Richard helps Diane get organised



Sitting down again!



Christine scans Diane into checkpoint 7

determined, and very competitive women... we didn't take "last place" very well at all!

So for the next two legs, as we ambled past the beautiful scenery of Whakaipo Bay and Kinloch, we argued, bickered, and just generally got brassed off with each other as we tried to determine what pace we should be walking at. Of course it was all nerves and logic flew completely out the window. We were still right on schedule and had actually passed over 50 teams already (clearly *they* didn't have a "schedule")... but we didn't seem to notice. Unbeknownst to Marinda and I, Diane was incredibly ill. She had been walking the entire day with a "dodgy" tummy, vomiting and the onset of a migraine!

When we reached the third check point at Kinloch, Graeme donned his Managers hat and gave the three of us a stern talking to. Something along the lines of "there are three of you in this team... be nice to each other... you've already put in the hard yards... slow down... you're right on schedule... support each other" etc. He was absolutely right too. It's funny how easy it was to get very caught up in the "competitive" moment and forget that we were actually a team.. and a bloody good one too!

So we set off into the night on the fourth leg. Diane was feeling much better after getting some medication into her system and generally our team morale had improved tenfold. It was just in the nick of time too, as we soon discovered that it was during the long, cold night that the majority of the teams fell apart. We even adopted a girl into our team for a couple of hours when we came across her walking on her own – abandoned by her own team because she was walking too slowly for them! How dangerous is that!

At one point we came across a body lying on the ground, completely wrapped up from head to toe in a space blanket with a very panicked team standing over him. They were soon met by an ambulance and we later discovered that he had passed out from dehydration and had then gotten hypothermia! This is when it suddenly got very real for us. We were out in the middle of no where, it was pitch black, freezing cold, and we were pushing our bodies to extreme exhaustion... and we still had a good 40km left to walk.

For me, the rest of the walk was pretty much a blur. We were cold, we were tired, our feet hurt, our blisters stung, and we just wanted to crawl into bed and sleep. That's when our Support Crew really carried us. Graeme even walked the 7th leg with us. 14km over a mountain from about 4am til 9am. He encouraged us, kept us awake, kept us motivated, and even helped to carry our packs! What a guy!

We reached the last check point in pretty good spirits, exhausted, but excited that we only had 14km to the finish line. After a hot cuppa and a bit of breakfast, we set off on the home straight – this time with my ipod blasting through speakers "These Boots Are Made For Walking" – and a new spring in our step in anticipation of finally finishing. 7km later we hit the Taupo lakefront. Glancing across the lake we could see the finish line and we could imagine ourselves crossing it. Then our eyes would pan around to the winding footpath that made a mere 7km look like a marathon. We were so close, but my heart sank as I knew that at the pace that we were now walking it would still be at least another painful hour before we made it. We literally just had to put one foot in front of the other and slowly but surely we closed the gap between us and the finish. We played games with ourselves, thinking "just make it to that fence line... OK great, now just make it to that lamp post", and I felt like a stuck record telling myself "my feet feel great, my feet feel great, my feet feel great"! This was definitely the hardest part for me.

Eventually we made it down to the marina where it was time to put on our fancy dress costume to cross the finish line. We dressed up in some of the compounding gear from work (hats, rubber gloves, gowns, masks etc). At that point it was hard to "get in the spirit" of things, but I'm glad we did it anyway.

We then climbed the stairs up to the Domain and slowly dragged our feet across the final 200m to the finish. There was our Support Crew, yelling and yahoing doing the Mexican Wave, our team was announced over the loud speaker, people were cheering and clapping and taking photos of us, and there was our time up on that big clock. 29 hours and 18 minutes. We'd done it... with 6 hours and 42 minutes to spare!! And we'd even achieved our goal of under 30 hours. This was the most incredible feeling ever.

I was just an emotional wreck. I was just so overwhelmed with what we had accomplished and all of the emotions that went with that, combined with severe exhaustion... well, there were definitely tears!!

The Recovery

Diane was in pretty good shape, but Marinda and I were a bit worse for wear! Our poor feet were so swollen and just covered in huge blisters. My feet didn't actually fit into shoes for several days afterwards!

It's now been a few weeks since and our muscles and feet have pretty well recovered. However Marinda was still having a bit of trouble with a sore ankle and has just been told by her physio that she has severely sprained it and possibly has a hairline fracture in one of the bones in her foot! Upon reflection Marinda thinks that she would have done this somewhere in the first half of the walk when she slipped over. So she basically walked over 50km with a sprained ankle and a possible fracture. Wow! I have a whole new respect for her now!!

So all in all, this was an amazing journey of self discovery, endurance, and fitness. Apparently 25% of the teams didn't finish, but then it wouldn't be called "the world's greatest team challenge" if it was easy.

Would I do it again? Ummm... possibly. "Never say never" is my motto! So onwards and upwards... life is for living! I wonder what my next challenge will be...?



Marinda gets a massage from Jan



Nearly there....



Wow! We made it!



The whole team.

Oxfam Trailwalker NZ
The world's greatest team challenge