

Shelburne man completes 11-hour Remembrance Day walk

Steve McNeil holds walking fundraiser at Fiddle Park in support of the Royal Canadian Legion

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When Steve McNeil hosts one of his marathon fundraisers, it typically starts with the tying of his skates and a swift glide onto the ice. This time, it began with the tying of his boots and one step in front of the next; for more than 11 hours of walking.

The Shelburne resident arrived at Fiddle Park at midnight on Monday (Nov. 11) to partake in a gruelling 11-hour and 11-minute walk around the park's 1-kilometre loop in the hopes of raising funds for the Royal Canadian Legion.

"I moved to Shelburne 18 months ago and I've never been happier in my life; part of that is volunteering at the legion," McNeil told the Free Press.

A few months ago, McNeil started walking the Fiddle Park loop to help stay active after sustaining an injury to his shoulder. It was during one of his walks that he came up with the idea to organize the 11:11 Laps for the Legion Marathon.

"My career with Canada Post means I have Remembrance Day off and I thought about how I wanted to spend my day off. The public pays me to be off today, so this is my way of giving back," said McNeil.

As part of the marathon walk, he asked community members to donate \$11.11 to their own legion branches or more broadly, the Royal Canadian Legion.

"Across our country so many of our legions have closed over the last 10 or 15 years because of financial constraints. All I'm trying to do is raise some awareness for our legions and try to get more people to get involved and be volunteers like I am," said McNeil.

McNeil noted the temporary closure of the Shelburne Legion during Remembrance Day heightened the importance of hosting the marathon walk.

"The fact that our veterans don't have a home, today, of all days of the year, is wrong. It makes this even more special of a walk for me," said McNeil.

During his walk, McNeil was encouraged by Town Councillor Len Guchardi and Shelburne Legion Past-President and veteran, Dean Schroeder, who joined in.

"My dad and uncles served in World War II and so the legion is really close to our family. I think what Steve is doing means a lot to the families around here. He stepped up and I can't say enough how much of an awesome member of this community he is," said Guchardi.

"He was there to support the veterans and I started to walk with him because I thought it was very important that a veteran also support him. Legions are built on volunteers so it's important for us as a community to help each other. A building is just a building; it takes volunteers and communities to make it a legion," Schroeder.

Going through a taxing physical activity to help raise money for charities is not an unknown act for McNeil, who every year hosts a marathon skate at Nathan Phillip Square to raise donations for Alzheimer's research.

McNeil took part in his first marathon skate in 2012, skating for 19 hours and 26 minutes in honour of his mother, Eunice, who was born in 1926 and had been battling Alzheimer's for 20 years. Following her passing in February of 2013, McNeil decided to turn his one-time marathon skate event into an annual fundraiser for Alzheimer's.

The first official 1926 Skate was held on Dec. 15 - his mother's birthday - in 2013 at Nathan Phillips Square. Since its inception, McNeil has taken part in 35 marathon skates, all of which have been 19 hours and 26 minutes long, across the country and has raised thousands of dollars for the Alzheimer's Society of Canada.

While for the last 12 years, McNeil raised donations and awareness for Alzheimer's, in 2024 he chose to expand his marathon skate to include all charities.

The decision to expand the event to include other charities came from the passing of McNeil's wife of 33 years, Tina. On Jul. 1, 2022, the couple were watching the nightly news when Tina had a seizure, and after a visit to the hospital, she was diagnosed with glioblastoma, a form of brain cancer. Just 39 days after being diagnosed, Tina died at Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto.

As a mailman with Canada Post for over 20 years, McNeil is used to pushing through cold and rainy weather, but as he managed the fatigue of spending hours walking alone overnight, McNeil kept his focus firmly on this:

"I had some really horrible weather last night, but the thing I kept thinking about was all the people laying in those ditches before they jumped over and fight, and I can imagine the weather being worse than it was for me," said McNeil. "I could have quit anytime I wanted to, but [they] didn't have that choice; I think about that a lot."

After completing more than 10 hours of countless laps of Fiddle Park, McNeil finished his 11:11 Marathon by walking to the cenotaph outside of Town Hall in Shelburne.

"I'm taking in the ceremony for our veterans and legion with the rest of our community, and this year it's been extra special," concluded McNeil.

To learn more about Steve McNeil's fundraising initiatives visit his website at: www.1926skate.com.