

I chose to raise funds for *brainstrust* as I found great comfort in their website when I was diagnosed back in January 2023, the resources available have been valuable to my friends and family as well. By sharing what work *brainstrust* do with my friends we have now been able to use the resources again to support someone else with a different tumour to myself. If I hadn't shared the Wear Grey campaign and shared my story, then supporting a friend would have been much harder.

In the lead up to A Coventry Way I was nervous, doubting my own capabilities and feeling unsure if it was the right thing to do even though I had completed this walk once before, but that was in 2021 when I felt much fitter and hadn't known about my Acoustic Neuroma and hadn't had an episode where my balance seemed to go on holiday without me.

The night before I was so excited, with each donation coming through I was becoming more excited and anxious, I didn't sleep at all that night as I was buzzing with anticipation. We were at £540 when we started the event at 05:35 the next morning, I thought this was fantastic and although I was tired, I was still looking forward to what lay ahead. 2.5 miles in and the total was at £595, I was feeling pretty good, positive and confident in my strides, walking poles left in my bag while I was feeling on top of the world. 8 miles in and the total is at £630, still feeling good, the weather was almost on our side, only a slight bit of rain so far, although the amount of rainfall in the lead up to the event meant there was more mud than anyone needs to see in a year! At 15 miles I was getting achy and desperate for the loo, with Lee by my side encouraging me and my Mum sending regular updates of my total I continued to plod along. Reaching checkpoint 2 some much needed sandwiches, toilets and play area boosted morale and we set off in high spirits ready for the next rain shower. The walking poles have now made it out of my bag and after trying them for a few minutes found them more of a hindrance than a help so passed them to Lee, one less thing for me to carry.

As we got closer to checkpoint 3 I was struggling, I'd reclaimed my walking poles and had found my rhythm, my feet were very painful and each time I took a step I had to pull my foot out of the squelching mud to move it forward. I could feel a blister forming and my boot was digging into the front of my ankle, each step was agony. When we reached the checkpoint at Brinklow Scout Hut there was a fantastic team of volunteers cheering as we hobbled in, I was almost in tears. Ready to give up and call it a day. 22 miles out of 40 and I was done. Not much food left at this checkpoint as we were slowing and towards the back of the event now, but some squash and snacks while sitting on the grass with my boots off my mood improved slightly. I texted Mum telling her I was struggling, the next minute I had a text from my brother to say check the JustGiving page, nearly at £700 now, don't give up. Another text, my youngest brother saying "You can do it Boty! Get your lil' legs moving" this one caught me off guard, it's rare to have a message without an insult in it, the tears threatened again, he followed it up with a message I can't repeat, and the laughter returned. While seriously considering giving up I took a moment to think of the reason I'm doing this, for the people who have the same tumour or a different one, for the people who's condition means walking to the kitchen is a challenge, and for friends who have just started their own journey navigating a diagnosis. Thinking of them I picked myself up and we carried on.

From this point the memory feels a little patchy, I was tired, tripping over my own feet and fed up of being stuck in the mud, knowing we had to pick up the pace and find some energy from somewhere to make it to the next checkpoint. We continued to put one foot in front of the other, the scenery now changed from fields of mud and footpaths that were more like bogs, to pavement and traffic, looking a little out of place in our walking gear we welcomed the ease of

movement and picked up the pace, when we made it to checkpoint 4 we only had 10 minutes to spare before they closed it, so a quick toilet break and some fresh fruit and snacks then we were on our way again. Trying really hard to keep the pace up, I became quiet, and found it hard to keep eating, Lee was pushing food into my mouth so I had no choice but to eat. Normally I'm quite noisy and constantly eating, this is how tired I was now. As the fatigue kicked in so did Pinky (my tumour) and I found it hard to stay upright, a few times I would have fallen over if it wasn't for the trusty walking poles. The stretch going through Bedworth was a blessing and a curse, it felt familiar, I felt close to home, I'd spent a lot of time here growing up and as an adult, however I hadn't really been back since my Granny passed away last year and walking past the lake we used to walk around, and through the housing estate that used to be fields where we would go to walk her dog felt very difficult, feeling the tears coming back again but this time I was too tired to fight them but also too tired for them to fall. When I did this walk with my friend in 2021 the section going through Bedworth to Astley and on to Fillongley was the hardest part, and it was this time too. You feel close to the end, you picture the route and know that the miles left are below 10, when you started you had 40 to go and now 10 seems such a small amount, but you don't have the energy and the anticipation anymore, you just have the need to stop, sleep and have a cup of tea. As we're walking up hill towards the next checkpoint we pass some people, feels weird as we hadn't seen many recently, most had finished by now. It felt good to pass them and know we weren't the last, but I knew it wouldn't feel good for them being overtaken. We got to the top of the field and someone came running back towards us saying they're closing the checkpoint, hurry up! I do not know where the energy came from, I ran, well as close to running as I could get, I moved my little legs as fast as I could, we couldn't finish the event here, at the last checkpoint, the finish was only 6 miles away, we have to make it. We made it, met with friendly faces, fresh oranges, ginger beer and sweets. It felt so good, but we had to move on as they closed the checkpoint and those people we'd passed on the way up the hill would have to stop here.

The last 6 miles, it was getting dark, I hadn't checked my phone, no idea what our total is and no messages of encouragement to read to boost our morale, Lee's watch had died, and mine not far off. The torches came out, the darkness has come in and the only thing I could hear was Lee telling me it's not far now, you got this, keep going. The styles were becoming more challenging, I felt disoriented in the dark and more off balance than normal, I was terrified of falling over and hurting myself. I barely said a word, no energy left and not really sure how I was still moving, my stomach was screaming at me, needing real food and not snacks and sugar. My watch is now dead, unsure of how far we have left but knowing from the map it's not much further, we're now on the last two pages of the route book, can't take that long surely? As we came to the last 2 fields to cross, we made the decision to follow the road around, I did not have it in me to walk across another uneven field in the dark and to climb some more styles. The road was longer, but less things to trip over, slow and steady, no cars, no people, nothing left to talk about. Lee still pushing me forward, supporting me anyway he can, he didn't give up even when I had, without him I wouldn't have got this far. We rounded the corner and had the last section of straight road and there was the finish. It was a sight for sore eyes and even sorer feet.

4 minutes left until the event finished, if you didn't make it back by 9pm, you didn't complete the challenge. Walking as fast as we could go, or hobbling as fast as we could, we walked up the last little incline to the village hall. We did it. We completed the challenge with 4 minutes to spare at 8:56pm.

Surrounded by people now, everyone looking shattered and tucking into jacket potatoes and cups of tea, pints of beer. All with our green certificates and t-shirts feeling proud we've just walked 40 miles in under 16 hours. Our total when we completed the event was at £735, I have to be honest and say the pain did not feel worth it, but that is still an incredible amount of money to raise. I checked my phone, Mum, "You still with us?" Me "Finally finished. I'm never walking again." The total distance covered 41.2 miles in 15 hours 22 minutes.

My doubts about my ability are now gone, I now love walking again and am not afraid to go back to walking in the hills, I can do it. And I will never take my health for granted, I was so afraid when my balance went that I would never be independent again. But I'm stubborn and continued to walk at least a mile each day with Lee by my side and 5 months later I have just walked 41.2 miles in 15 hours, keep taking those little steps, you'll be surprised where you end up.

The total kept rising and as it got to £900 I was ecstatic, now the pain felt worth it. As the pain wore off and I was back at work a notification came through, we reached £1000! A colleague had seen our JustGiving page and pushed us up to hit £1000. I couldn't believe it. How incredible that my little legs have just raised an insane amount of money, oh and don't forget the cash donations, with those paid in we finished our fundraising with a grand total of £1015 for *brainstrust*.

A huge thank you to everyone who donated, sent messages of support and to the organisers of the event enabling us to complete A Coventry Way 2024.

