

THE TALE OF TERRY FOX

by Michael A. Aun, FIC, LUTCF, CSP, CPAE Speaker Hall of Fame

When I first met Terry Fox, we were joined together on a program in Toronto, Ontario, Canada before 4,000 Toastmasters at an international convention in 1978. We were both scheduled to speak to the group. I was competing for the World Championship of Public Speaking. Terry was competing for something far more important than trophies and awards. Terry Fox was competing for his life.

At the young age of 22, freckle-faced Terry Fox lost his life to a battle with cancer. Some of his Canadian brethren died with him.

On April 12, 1980, twenty-one year old Terry Fox began what has come to be known as his “Marathon of Hope.” Succumbing to cancer in the prime of his life, Fox decided he would bring attention to the awful disease with a marathon. He began a marathon across Canada with reporters and cameramen on his heels as he sought to cross his native land on foot.

Terry Fox lost his leg to cancer when he was a teenager. While in the hospital going through chemo, he was affected by the amount of suffering in the cancer ward and decided that, in his words, “Somewhere the hurting must stop.” He decided to run across Canada to raise funds for cancer research, running 28-30 miles per day on one real leg and one artificial leg.

Three thousand three hundred thirty nine miles later, a choked up nation looked on as a young Terry Fox collapsed short of his goal. The unprecedented challenge to a nation brought an estimated \$35 million in for cancer research as Fox’s dramatic run across Canada fell short as his health finally failed him.

In an earlier attempt to stop the cancer from spreading across his body, Fox underwent the amputation of his right knee. Now with the support of an artificial leg, he began the dramatic race to Canada’s west coast with his right leg amputated just above the knee. A tearful world looked on when he started in St. John’s Newfoundland, the point where North America reaches the farthest into the Atlantic Ocean.

With one artificial leg, Fox set out on his journey completing 28-30 miles per day along the Trans-Canada Highway, the narrow concrete and asphalt ribbon that spans the second largest nation on earth. With the world cheering him on through the eyes of the press, Terry Fox fought his biggest battle ever, and lost. His dramatic termination run in Thunder Bay brought an outpouring of emotion, the likes of which Canada has never seen before.

On September 1, 1980, 143 days and 3,339 miles into his “Marathon of Hope” across Canada, Terry was forced to stop running outside Thunder Bay, Ontario because the cancer had spread to his lungs. On June 28, 1981, he died at the age of 22.

Nearly 6,000 Torontonians signed a petition urging creation of a commemorative stamp in Terry’s honor. A monument was erected at the Thunder Bay site where Terry’s courageous marathon ended. After months of resisting, Canada agreed to honor Terry’s Marathon of Hope on a stamp.

Terry Fox was awarded the Order of Canada, the country’s highest civilian recognition. A ballad was written about his cross-country endeavor, and campaigns for official government recognition of Terry’s Marathon of Hope sprang up all over Canada.

As he lay on his deathbed, Terry Fox said goodbye to a gracious nation and an emotional world that many felt were unable to believe in heroes anymore. Thin and pale, Terry developed a bronchitis-like infection and was spitting blood. A tearful nation looked on in prayer as young Terry Fox began the final 385 yards of his personal “Marathon for Life.”

Terry Fox’s life was not given in vain. There are hundreds of trivial sayings one could apply to the situation: “A winner never quits; a quitter never wins...” or “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.” Winning for Terry Fox was the breath of life.

Perhaps the greatest tribute to Terry Fox is the fact that the foundation that he helped start has now raised \$360 million for cancer research, about \$10 for every Canadian citizen.