



Sierra Views: Ric Ryan, walking man

Written by [Christina O'Haver, The Union Democrat](#) April 18, 2013 10:52 am



Ric Ryan, of Murphys, is known as the “Walking Man of Murphys.” Amy Alonzo Rozak / Union Democrat, Copyright 2013. If you see a man with an orange vest and a walking stick hiking along Highway 4 between Murphys and Angels Camp, remember to wave at him.

Ric Ryan, widely known as the “Walking Man of Murphys,” turns those waves into donations for military veterans in need of operations.

For each wave, the Vietnam veteran gives 25 cents to Operation Mend. He’s raised more than \$4,000 from his own pocket and thousands more in donations given to him, totaling \$27,551, according to the organization.

If the retiree receives numerous waves and is strapped for cash, he works “odd jobs” to come up with the money.

Ryan will present Operation Mend with another check on May 8, when he travels to the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center for a lunch in his honor. Program founder Ron Katz, hospital CEO Dr. David Feinberg and patients will show their gratitude.

This Saturday, Ryan will celebrate a personal milestone. He plans to reach his 5,000th mile since he started logging his efforts on Sept. 22, 2008.

The 67-year-old ex-Marine starts his walk nearly every morning at Tower Mart in Murphys,

where employees and customers greet the familiar man.

He comes prepared with a walking stick, glove, two knee braces, an orange reflective vest, a veteran's baseball cap and, of course, his MP3 player. He walks roughly 8.5 miles round trip, belting out Righteous Brothers and country songs along the way.

One of his favorites is "Some Gave All," a song by Billy Ray Cyrus that commemorates veterans.

Ryan was inspired to raise money for Operation Mend after hearing news stories about injured and disfigured veterans who received free life-changing surgeries through the program.

His single largest donation was a \$2,500 check from Jeff German, owner of Autosmith in Hathaway Pines.

German, who has known Ryan for about 10 years, said he made the donation one morning when he was in a bad mood.

"I just wanted to do something that would make me feel better," he said.

Ryan's tears of joy turned German's day around.

Having walked long distances throughout his life, Ryan pledged to make his journeys count.

When he first started walking for veterans, he traveled as far southeast as Tuolumne township and as far northeast as Lake Alpine. Now, with two bum knees, he sticks to Calaveras County.

It takes him just under 2.5 hours to walk the route, and he tries to walk at least five times per week.

He walks in rain, snow and heat. About two years ago, after walking in triple-digit weather, Ryan was transported by ambulance to Sonora Regional Medical Center with dehydration.

While living in Seattle as a teenager, Ryan used to walk to blow off steam and escape troubles at home.

One summer at age 15, he was so angry at his mother that he took off on foot. He called her from Montana three days later and said he would return in time for school in the fall.

By walking, hitchhiking and train-hopping, Ryan ended up in South Dakota, where he worked odd jobs until returning to Seattle.

"So that's how I started walking," he said. "I've been walking my whole life."

He made the same trip the next two summers and went to Vietnam the third.

He ditched class on his 18th birthday to enlist in the Marine Corps, fulfilling a childhood dream and escaping family drama.

“I’ve always had a thing about the Marine Corps as a kid,” he said. “If I was going in the service, I wanted to be a Marine.”

He served from 1964 to 1968 and attained the rank of sergeant. He was supposed to build roads in Vietnam but he and other Marines were often interrupted by firefights.

He doesn’t have any photos from his time in the service because he dropped his camera while running from an attack.

Still, serving in the military was the best thing that ever happened to him, besides meeting his wife, he said.

“I’m a firm believer that the way I grew up — if I wouldn’t have went in the Corps, I would have ended up in jail,” he said.

Ryan met his wife, Joanne, while living in San Carlos after the service. By day, he worked as an ironworkers apprentice. By night, he made pizza and served beer at a pizza parlor, where Joanne was a frequent customer.

Forty-three years, three kids and seven grandchildren later, they’re still married.

In 1971, the Ryans bought a house in Arnold, where Joanne’s mother-in-law moved after her husband died. About a decade later, they built a house in Murphys and moved to Calaveras County full-time.

In addition to funding operations for veterans, walking has been great exercise for Ryan and therapy for his post traumatic stress disorder.

“I enjoy it and when I get a donation, then my walk is so much more fun,” he said.

Katz, the Los Angeles philanthropist who gave \$1 million to start Operation Mend in 2007, told the Los Angeles Times that Ryan’s contribution is anything but small.

“Ric Ryan mesmerizes me,” he said. “He’s one man walking, without even a sign, just a passion to help this enormous cadre of wounded soldiers. The money he gives is an extraordinary contribution of hope.”