

Students take strides alongside 'Walking Man of Murphys'

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With tears in his eyes, Ric Ryan beamed as Christian Family Learning Center's 100 students gathered around him.

"He's our Kindness Hero," announced CLFC principal Larry Smith, his arm draped around Ryan.

Last Wednesday, CFLC and Ryan took a victory lap to celebrate CFLC's \$1,500 donation to Operation Mend in honor of Ryan, who is known locally as the Walking Man of Murphys for his frequent walks along Highway 4 between Angels Camp and Murphys.

After years of walking in the name of health, Ryan chose to exercise for a charitable cause in 2008, when he saw a CNN report on Operation Mend, a UCLA-based program that provides reconstructive surgery at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center to service members injured in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Ryan served as a Marine in the Vietnam War from 1964 to 1968, and one day, while on his walk, Ryan decided to incorporate his passion for supporting the troops into his daily life: For every community member that waved to him from the highway, he would donate \$0.25 of his own money to Operation Mend.

His efforts began humbly, but as exposure to his mission increased, so did the donations. Local businesses sent funds, and community members began to stop along the highway to hand him their contributions.

"Last week," recalled Ryan with a grin, "one man stopped and handed me a roll of quarters."

As of today, Ryan has collected and personally donated about \$20,000.

Wearing an orange reflective vest labeled with the initials "USMC," this Marine Corps veteran walks roughly eight-and-a-half miles a day. He has logged 4,685 miles for Operation Mend and intends to reach 5,000 by September, which makes an average of 1,000 miles per year.

Colleen Hancock, Ryan's neighbor and eighth-grade CFLC teacher, shared her amazement over Ryan's devotion to the cause.

"You see him walking when it's 20 degrees outside, just the same as when it's 100 degrees," she said. "Nothing keeps him from walking."

Eighth-grader Jared Howard, 13, said that during the drive to school in the morning, he often sees Ryan. "I think it's very kind and generous," Jared praised of Ryan's efforts. "I think everybody should be donating to a cause."

Jared and the rest of his peers at CFLC did their part. With the overflow from funds raised for CFLC's Christmas pageant last year, the school donated the funds to Ryan's cause. Coincidentally, the money was earned through a walk-a-thon.

"(Ryan) is an inspiration for being healthy and for fundraising," said Smith. "And we've sort of adopted him."

Along with the CFLC family two years ago, Ryan was funded by the school to travel to Washington, D.C., where he saw the Vietnam War Memorial Wall for the first time.

For Ryan, it was an emotional experience. He said it reminded him of his favorite song, "Some Gave All" by Billy Rae Cyrus, which says, "Love your country and live with pride / And don't forget those who died, American can't you see / All gave some and some gave all."

Last Wednesday, Ryan urged the crowd of students to remember this.

"When you're growing up through life," he said, "you should always try to give. It's not about what you do; it's what you leave."

For more information on Operation Mend, visit the program's website at operationmend.ucla.edu.

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