



A COMMUNITY WALKS ITS WAY TO HEALTH: Penticton Unleashes The Power Of Innovative Partnerships

In February 2004, Naramata resident Jim Mulholland had surgery to replace both of his knees. That December, he began a walking program and by March 2005 had clocked 1,700 kilometers and was well on his way to reaching Las Vegas. The retired teacher was counting his steps with a small pedometer worn on his belt. He was walking in the Penticton area, while tracking his distance to Vegas on a website run by the Penticton Steps Out program. He may not have been marching along a U.S. highway, but every stride was the real thing. These days Jim is walking to Hawaii – also through Steps Out.

According to Jim, “I lost 14 pounds, my blood pressure is down, my pulse more regular, I feel great and the knees are better than ever.” He found the support he needed to get walking after a chat in the Penticton Community Centre parking lot directed him to Steps Out. He signed up and since then, the pedometer helps him count his 6,000 to 8,000 steps a day and keeps him motivated. “I’m not really that competitive, I do this for me and I know I’m doing something good for my heart... this is working.”

Steps Out is a walking/pedometer program that was given birth through a partnership between the City of Penticton and Interior Health’s hearts@work program, an initiative of the Healthy Heart Society of B.C. They and numerous other supporters have a common goal: to increase the wellbeing of local residents. A Steps Out advertisement promises to “help you increase your walking each day and make it fun at the same time”. More than 600 participants have received a pedometer, a logbook, walking route maps, unlimited access to guided walks and entry to a website to record their day to day progress. There are seminars, films and a chance to win prizes (grand prize this year is a trip to Hawaii). While that is certainly enough to be celebrated, there is more....

Working with Interior Health and the Healthy Heart Society allows Steps Out to offer Active Living Health Fairs, which incorporate hearts@work. People attend a free day-long event at the Community Centre, moving through stations that provide them with screening for their risks for heart disease. According to Bev Arsenault, the Interior Health Coordinator for the Integrated Health Clinic in Penticton and a trainer for the Healthy Heart Society, “They leave knowing much more about their state of health and also knowing what they can do to maintain and improve it. For clients who want to walk – we point them to Steps Out.”

Merle Irvine, like Jim Mulholland, is walking her way to Hawaii...without leaving town. Merle is a volunteer with Steps Out – she discovered the program through a local newspaper story and is now the leader of a walking group that hits local streets and paths three times a week. The group is known as *Motor with Merle*, so it’s no surprise that they are fast walkers. A typical Saturday walk may find them winding down after 15 or more kilometers.

Merle is a recognized athlete – at the recent World Masters Games in Edmonton she won gold and silver in the 10 and 5 kilometer walking races. She also won a half marathon in Kelowna... the day before her 75th birthday. Merle enjoys the feeling she gets from walking, “I know it keeps me healthy and when I walk fast, the endorphins kick in and it feels pretty good.” She credits Steps Out for great support to her and her fellow walkers, “The pedometers and the website help us track our steps and compare speeds and times.”

Almost half of Canadians are overweight and sedentary and this number is on the rise. Diabetes affects more than two million of us and will reach another million by the end of this decade. This matters because living with a chronic condition shortens life and reduces its quality. There is no doubt that choices around physical activity are part of the health puzzle. Penticton is a community where inactivity is being challenged. Bob Pope, Steps Out Coordinator, has organized special events for the city for many years and says, "This is a continuous, non-stop special event – it's almost scary how much it's grown."

And just how is it growing? Carol Stathers, a Nurse Educator with the Interior Health Authority, worked with Bob and local schools, using a "kid-friendly" hearts@work model, to develop a sister-program called Step into Action. Grade Six youth participate in their own pedometer project, with a web-tracking system and incentives such as concert tickets, pool parties and activity passes to keep them on the move. According to Carol, "We've got them walking to Vancouver via the Coquihalla Highway. As they pass certain locations on the map, they're surprised with a pop-up on the computer screen that provides geographic or health information or asks them a question." At the hearts@work fair for younger Step into Action participants, students not only learn about staying healthy, but test out a range of activities, from yoga to martial arts.

The Healthy Heart Society exists to reduce the impact of heart disease in B.C. and has been an ally from the beginning. This innovative partnership recently led to a baby boomer hearts@work Health Fair, which packed the Community Centre with the age group known as the 'bulge generation' – for their numbers, not their waistlines.

An interesting phenomenon occurs when something is successful and generates so much positive energy... it spreads. Steps Out has been adapted in eight other B.C. cities – for example, Osoyoos walkers are heading to Inuvik and Delta residents are strolling to Whistler. The Step into Action youthful version is expanding in School District 67 and is being tested as a model for ActionSchools BC, a physical activity program designed for B.C. elementary schools. Bob Pope and The City of Penticton were thrilled to receive both the B.C. Recreation and Parks Association (BCRPA) 2005 Award for Program Excellence and the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA) 2005 Award of Excellence for Innovation.

"We couldn't have done any of this without the amazing partnerships we have," says Bob Pope. "There are a host of sponsors, donating everything from airline tickets to advertising... it really adds to the excitement and helps us keep it affordable." When asked for advice on how to sustain these efforts, Bev Arsenault noted, "The key institutional partners are the city, the health authority and the school board. It takes time and money to keep it all going. There is plenty of evidence to prove the health benefits of an activity program like this and I'd like to see the main partners invest funds on an ongoing basis – to make it part of our work."

Penticton may have the most pedometers per capita in the country. Every ticking pedometer represents a potential health improvement. At the peak of the "Walk to Vegas Contest", over one million steps a day were logged on the website. Thousands of those paces were Jim Mulholland's, working out his new knees and his new attitude. Many thousands more were taken by Merle Irvine, who makes walking look easy and inspires others to lace up. If this can happen for them and happen in Penticton, it can happen for anyone and in any community.

Steps Out www.penticton.ca/step/faq.asp

Healthy Heart Society <http://www.heartbc.ca/about/hhs.htm>

Interior Health Integrated Health Clinic, Penticton
<http://www.interiorhealth.ca/Health+Services/Primary+Health/Chronic+Disease/Integrated+Health+Clinic+in+Penticton.htm>

BCRPA award to Penticton <http://www.bcrpa.bc.ca/PDF/Awards/ProgramExcellenceaward.pdf>