

Turning millstones into milestones

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> Kevin O'Neill and his wife Dolores



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"In 1995 when I was thirty four and a young father, I was really shocked and disturbed to be told that I had testicular cancer. I had never smoked in my life. I had never drank. Somehow I just knew that what I had to do was stay positive in the face of this news. I had surgery and then radiotherapy treatment at Belvoir. I stayed up at Belvoir then for three full weeks. This was tough. Away from my family. Dolores managing the children, holding down a full time job and coming up to Belvoir to see me as often as she could. She was a great support. I go nowhere without her. But there I was, a fit young man, coping with cancer, putting in my days at Belvoir in the company of men and women much older than me with whom I felt I had little in common- except the cancer. In ways I was very isolated. And I knew I had to stay strong not just for me but for Dolores and especially for the children. You see I lost my own father when I was six years of age. There were three of us, two younger than me. He was twenty eight. I still feel that loss.

As you might guess, the second

time around was more of a shock than the first time. The "Why me?" question became "Why me- again?" I thought I had put cancer behind me. Those regular hospital appointments which had gone on for years after the first diagnosis had faded from my life. Everything had begun to feel fine. But around November last year I started to feel unwell again. I was losing energy. I felt drained. Then I discovered a swelling in my testes. That shook me. Testicular cancer was diagnosed all over again. Dr Ann Doherty at Great James Street was a great support. And what choice had I other than to stay positive. By now I had six children, Dolores having given birth to Rhianna, now six, in 2005.

"Stay positive in your outlook" you always hear this said, especially when people are diagnosed with cancer but what does that actually mean and how do you do it? How do you stay positive in the face of such news all over again? Well first of all I trusted the doctors and the medical people at my local health centre in Great James Street, at Altnagelvin and at the City Hospital, Belfast, as well as the staff of McMillan Cancer. Their care was really important. I have a strong heart and strong will power. I was always fit, always into running or involved in some sport. Running has helped me. It keeps me focused and helps to stop me from thinking about the cancer more than I might have. Thank God that I have that inner strength. I joined Foyle Valley running club in 2005 and just kept training and showing up for races in "the purple vest", the club's colours. Three years ago I completed the Waterside Half Marathon in 1.44. I was well pleased with that. In September 2010 ran it in 1.54 but I knew I wasn't quite right. That run was not long before the second diagnosis of cancer. This year, while combating the cancer, I managed to get round in



2.08. While that is 24 minutes slower than three years ago, it was a great achievement. I felt that I was on the way back, a year on from the second cancer diagnosis. And Dolores finished the ten mile walk that is organised alongside the Waterside Half. At the end we celebrated together. Her walk, my run, a milestone together.

Running has been good for me. And walking too. When I didn't have the energy to run, sometimes I'd walk out to Burt Chapel from where we live off the Buncrana Road. I love to go out there and just sit in the silence. 99% of the time there is no one there. I have space for my own thoughts. I make my own prayer. And others too have prayed for me to get through this. I value their prayers. Our whole family does. I don't consider myself religious. I don't go to Mass on a Sunday, I am not interested. I see myself as more spiritual than religious. But I love the Walk to Knock. When I was recovering the first time round, the late Jimmy Herron inspired me to get involved in the Walk. When I first attempted

the Walk back in 1996, a year after first learning of my cancer, I wasn't sure I could do it. Was I fit enough? I was on heavy medication. But I walked all 135 miles over a four and a half day period. I couldn't wait to do it again the following year. I got to know the "regulars" who walk it each year. I got to love it. I got to love the sense of community that has been established there amongst the walkers and the supporters of the Walk. I have done it every year since. This year Dolores and my son Gavin(20) and daughters Rochelle(18) and Shannon(16) walked with me some of the way. I had turned fifty this year. I was still on medication after my diagnosis the previous November. Given all that, I wasn't sure if I could manage the distance. But I did. That Sunday coming into Knock, meeting up with Dolores and my children was really emotional. Every year the Walk to Knock is different. Because each of the walkers will have different things happening in their lives in the year between. For me this year I faced the return of

the testicular cancer. And yet still I got there. (And from there I then went on to run the Waterside Half Marathon.)

I read too. Reading helps me stay positive. I got into Paulo Coelho. Someone introduced one of his books to me- The Alchemist. And I thought this fits with my way of looking at the world and my way of thinking about religion. If Jesus came back, maybe he'd join us on the Walk to Knock; maybe he'd join us on a Foyle Valley training run. Maybe he'd avoid installing himself in a church. Paulo Coelho brings that kind of thinking out in me. And he helped me get interested in tackling the Camino de Santiago. That's an ambition of mine. To get organised and do the camino. Two friends of mine, Barry Mc Laughlin and Joe Doherty have just come back after completing the 700 kilometres full pilgrimage over a 33 day period. I am inspired by them to think I could take it on. That'd be another milestone."