

HEADLINE: The unending story of Terry Fox

SUBHEADLINE: With many other countries around the world, Thailand took part in the Terry Fox Run to raise funds for cancer research. Terry Fox's mother was on hand for this special occasion

BYLINE: WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

The loss of a child is surely a most tragic and traumatising experience for a mother. Yet as the years pass, time usually triumphs, patiently healing the atrocious wound or at least easing the pain.

But for the Canadian mother of four, Betty Fox, whose son Terry died of cancer at the age of 22, despite the nearly 20 years that have passed since the death of her son in 1981, the wound is still there _ and still painful. Not a single day passes, she says, without someone or something twisting the knife in the wound, over and over again.

Betty Fox says she has no choice, although ``it is hell sometimes".

She was in Thailand to mark the 20th anniversary of Terry's ``marathon of hope".

She willingly keeps her wound open for the world to see and to learn from it, fulfilling her son's wish to raise awareness of the suffering endured by cancer patients, and to collect funds for cure-oriented research.

When the young Terry from Port Coquitlam, British Columbia, contracted a rare type of bone cancer, known as osteogenetic sarcoma, at 18 years of age, he stepped into darkness, clashing head-on with the frontiers of human knowledge and power _ frontiers that the wilful and strong university student wanted to move beyond in the instinct for survival.

``I don't know anything about cancer. But I will try very hard to fight it because I am not yet ready to leave this world," Betty Fox remembers her son saying one day, in a rage and just before having his right leg amputated, knowing his chance of survival was about 50 percent.

After enduring chemotherapy for 18 months and witnessing the suffering of other patients as well_ ``their loss of dignity, lack of support and care," stresses his mother _ Terry Fox vowed to run across Canada to raise money for cancer research.

``The night before the operation, his high school basketball coach brought a magazine which featured an article about an amputee, Dick Traum, who had run in the New York City Marathon," Mrs Fox explains.

``Six days after the amputation, Terry got a prosthesis and very quickly learned to walk on his own, and then to run. He never said at first that he would do a marathon but he started training very intensively for 14 months _ weightlifting, climbing hills, and so on. My husband Rolly and I felt he was hurting his body, and the remainder of his (amputated) limb was getting sore and bleeding against the prosthesis. But he was very determined, telling us to mind our own business.

``Then one day, Terry told us he was preparing for a marathon, but later admitted he was actually planning to run across Canada. Accompanied by a friend who was driving a van, he

ran for 143 days, across six provinces. He ran under the snow, the rain, the sun, the heat and humidity, stopping to tell people what he was doing."

As Terry Fox did his cross-country run, he captured the hearts of the Canadian people, galvanising the nation with his sheer will and boundless determination. People were lining the roads to see him, donations were pouring in, and soon rewards and honours _ the youngest Companion of the Order of Canada, the Newsmaker of the Year by the Canadian Press, the Lou Marsh Trophy for outstanding athletic achievement _ came pouring in.

But on September 1, 1980, just east of Thunder Bay, Ontario, the 22-year-old, curly-haired, good-looking and sunburned Terry, still incredulous at the persistence of the disease, was forced to stop. His cancer had returned, spreading from his legs to his lungs.

He passed away 10 months later, on June 28, 1981, one month short of his 23rd birthday.

``He had to come back to Vancouver. He was always thinking that he would later be able to go back to complete his marathon, and he refused many offers from friends to finish his run for him," Mrs Fox said. But when Isadore Sharp, chairman and founder of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, learned that Terry Fox would not survive, he sent him a telegram, which Terry pinned to his hospital bed. He said Terry's marathon was just the beginning and that a fund-raising run would be held in his name every year to continue his fight against cancer.

``You started it. We will not rest until your dream to find a cure for cancer is realised," the telegram read.

The Marathon of Hope, now called the Terry Fox Run, has become an annual event in about 55 countries worldwide. It is now the largest single day fund-raiser for cancer research in the world. Since 1981, more than \$250 million (11 billion baht) has been raised in his name. The immensely courageous young man has been ranked _according to a survey sponsored in 1999 by Canada's National Post_ as Canada's greatest hero and the Guinness Book of Records named him the top fund-raiser.

What happened last Sunday at the crack of dawn near the Regent Hotel in Bangkok, where hundreds of people from all walks of life and all age groups gathered for a five- or 10-kilometre run, raising some hundreds of thousands of baht, is one more proof that Terry's story didn't end with his death.

His hope to find a cure for cancer is still alive and well and being carried on in the hearts of scientists and researchers throughout the world.

``I still have to pinch myself sometimes to believe that I am here, travelling the world, because of my son. It is just fabulous to hear which projects the money has helped to finance," Mrs Fox said to an audience of doctors, researchers and nurses at Bangkok's National Cancer Institute.

As the honorary chairman of the Terry Fox Foundation, Mrs Fox is indeed being invited to places throughout the world and is currently touring five countries in Asia for the first time, together with Breeda McClew, the foundation's international director.

In Thailand, Terry Fox Runs have been held every year since 1995 at the Regent Hotel in Bangkok and from 1996, at the Regent in Chiang Mai as well.

So far (not including this year's runs in Bangkok and Chiang Mai), the runs have raised 4.15 million baht. The proceeds go directly to the Oncological Society of Thailand under the Patronage of Her Majesty the Queen, for the purposes of cancer research (see A helping hand for research in Thailand, Page 1).

During her visit to the National Cancer Institute, Mrs Fox and Mrs McClew were particular about the administration of the fund, making sure the money was indeed on a separate bank account and that the research being funded was cure-oriented.

“A few days before dying, Terry explained that he did not want the funds to be restricted to one kind of cancer, but to be used for all kinds of cancer. He said, ‘Only fund the best kind of research possible. Don’t waste the money,’” his mother explained, stressing that the Terry Fox Foundation (which has nine offices in Canada and 21 full-time employees) was very strict about the funding, which had to be approved by the National Cancer Institute of Canada.

“My dream is that the cause of cancer will be found in my lifetime. I always tell researchers, ‘You better hurry up because I don’t have a whole lot of time left!’” Mrs Fox said, laughing and showing her sense of humour, which she says has helped her keep her sanity.

Visiting patients in wards at the National Cancer Institute and then again at the Maha Vajiralongkorn Thanyaburi Cancer Centre in Pathum Thani, where many were in the terminal phase, Betty Fox plunged straight back into the harsh and pitiless reality of cancer.

Cancer is an illness which claims young and old alike. In Thailand, it afflicts some 60,000 people a year (new cases include 1,000 or so children), and kills some 30,000 people.

“It was delightful to meet with the researchers and with people who brought the run to Thailand. But I have to be honest and say that being in the palliative care unit was not such a delightful experience,” Mrs Fox said.

“It is not easy. I must admit I dreaded to be here today. It’s not my favourite thing to visit cancer patients, nor laboratories. I am not comfortable with it. It’s very hard. It’s the hardest job I have ever done. Harder than raising my children, harder than running the store I used to run or tending to the staff. Every day it hurts inside _ sometimes I have to tell Terry’s story four, five or six times in one day. It is hell sometimes ... But I have to do it, I believe it is important. It is my life. If I want to do it, no one can stop me.”

Like mother, like son.

Betty Fox knows that she is one of the dynamos behind the hope for a cure for cancer. Her beloved son, with his boundless determination, propelled her on this path. For the love of her son, she has to stay the course.