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SITE INDEX

[Home Page](#)
[News](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Letters](#)
[Sports](#)
[Entertainment](#)
[The Drive](#)
[Dining](#)
[Urban Landscape](#)
[City Calendar](#)
[Travel](#)
[Restaurant](#)
[Reviews](#)
[Back Issues](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[About Us](#)
[Community Links](#)
[Contests](#)

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NEWS


Fonyo knows what it's like to be photographed. He became a national story when his cross-Canada run hit Ontario. Photo courtesy Vancouver Province

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fonyo's lonely road

By Bob Mackin-contributing writer

When Steve Fonyo goes to work these days, he doesn't run. He drives and walks. His cats Mopar and Viper accompany him to the Surrey garage where he's a heavy machinery mechanic.

Glad-handing politicians, reporters, photographers and hordes of admirers followed Fonyo during his cross-Canada Journey for Lives run for cancer research. The 425-day, 7,924-kilometre odyssey ended 20 years ago this afternoon in Victoria.

He was 19 years old and on top of the world when he raised \$13 million for the Canadian Cancer Society to battle cancer, the disease that forced doctors to amputate his left leg when he was just 12 years old.

After Fonyo crossed Mile 0 of the Trans-Canada Highway near Beacon Hill Park, he descended to a beach that was later named for him, stepped into the Pacific with his artificial leg and emptied a jar-full of Atlantic water. One chapter of his life was over, another about to begin.

He became a youth ambassador for the federal government. The B.C. government paid for him to take a helicopter pilot's course. He was awarded the Order of Canada and named Canada's athlete of the year for 1985.

He travelled the world, met Prince Charles and Princess Diana; had tea with Beatle George Harrison, shook hands with Mikhail Gorbachev and had a phone call from Ronald Reagan. He even ran from Edinburgh, Scotland to London's Trafalgar Square on a British version of the Journey for Lives.

"Too bad it's all lost now," Fonyo said during an interview last weekend at a Metrotown pub. "I'm 39 years old. I'm fixing trucks, doing a real good job and everybody's really happy, but I'm not

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happy. It's not what I want to do. Look at my hands, I had to shower twice before I came here. I still don't know what I want to do."

Fonyo is a month shy of his 40th birthday. His hair is thinning and he wears horn-rimmed eyeglasses. Unless he flashes the grin that graced newspapers and television screens during the spring of 1985, you might not recognize him. When he ran across the country, he was shy. Twenty years later, he doesn't smile as much and he's reluctant to discuss the past.

"I cancelled my voice mail for a couple of weeks just to let me think exactly how I should do this," he said. "I'm not Rick Hansen, I don't have a publicist, I don't have an ad agency. I'm on my own. I have to be careful what I do."

The silver anniversary of the beginning of Terry Fox's Marathon of Hope is remembered with a special edition loonie and a book by Douglas Coupland. But Fonyo is a forgotten man, a Lost Hero, which is the title of his forthcoming autobiography written with Mission's Joe Normandin.

He was thrust into the spotlight as a teenager, constantly compared to Fox, who died before he could finish his cross-country run. Normandin said Fonyo not only dealt with fame and the ensuing loss of privacy, but he even had to deal with a bomb threat in the waning days of the run. As he approached the Fraser Valley, undercover police officers and soldiers hid in the bush to protect him as the crowds swelled.

"That's quite a trauma for a kid to go through," Normandin said. "Steve was being controlled by the cancer society, by the media, by the run. He lost who Steve was."

Fonyo was a 15-year-old living in White Rock when he saw Fox on BCTV, speaking of his ambitious goal to run across Canada and raise a dollar from every Canadian to beat cancer, a disease that claimed Fox's right leg and later his life.

"I thought 'Wow, I could never do that,'" Fonyo said. "But here I am."

Fonyo moved with father Steve Sr. and mother Anna to Vernon after they sold a farm and bought a restaurant. Before they moved, Fonyo decided to run across Canada and raise money to beat cancer. He was laughed at: Fox was a college athlete. Fonyo was a stocky high school kid.

He got himself in shape, getting up as early as 4 a.m. to hop and skip around a track. Older sister Suzanne helped solicit corporate donations. His biggest backer, controversial oilman J. Bob Carter, pledged any and all help after hearing Fonyo interviewed on the radio.

Suzanne accompanied Fonyo to St. John's, Newfoundland where he quietly started the trek on March 31, 1984 by dipping his artificial leg in the Atlantic and scooping a jar-full of Atlantic water before running through snowy streets. His parents, both immigrants from Hungary, were back home in Vernon, scared their son would meet the same fate as Fox.

It took six weeks before the Canadian Cancer Society granted its support, just as Fonyo was in Nova Scotia. With that came a full range of after-hours appearances at schools, city halls and shopping malls.

"It became a 24-hour project, I don't know how I did it," he said. "I didn't have a clue what I was getting into when I started, I didn't realize how big Canada was. I was 17 years old and believe me, after the first two or three days running in Newfoundland, I tell you what my words were: what did I get myself into?"

At his best, he did 28.5 miles in a day, but in Montreal, he came off the road for two weeks of personal time to celebrate his 18th birthday in the city where he was born.

"I said it was due to shin splints and muscle problems, [but] I wanted to take two weeks and check it out. I loved it there."

On Nov. 29, he finished running in Fox's footsteps when he passed the Fox memorial near Thunder Bay. He carried on to Dryden, Ont., where he broke for Christmas and returned to Vernon on Dec. 20. But he almost never resumed the journey. He said

the Canadian Cancer Society, which demanded he sign a liability waiver, cancelled his return air tickets and returned the motorhome to its owner. Carter intervened and the run continued on Jan. 3. Fonyo said cancer society executives secretly feared the annual Terry Fox Run would be in jeopardy if someone else completed the run Fox began.

"It was such a simple idea, all I wanted to do was run across Canada to help people so they wouldn't have to get cancer like I did," he said. "It affected my life, it changed my life, it changed the way I think after that. I don't know if disappointment is the word, I think [it's] more confused."

Fonyo divorced himself from the behind-the-scenes politics and did what he did best. Run. But it was through the worst weather possible. Relentless blizzards hit as Ontario turned into Manitoba.

"I really honestly didn't think I was going to make it, when winter hit in, I was practically crawling up hills."

He made another trip to the West Coast under less festive circumstances when it became too painful in his right leg to run in Brandon, Man. Dr. David Chan diagnosed tendinitis and a stress fracture, but he returned to the road anyway. "I knew I was going to make it when I hit Regina. I knew I was OK."

The Rocky Mountains in springtime were hardly the barrier the media made them out to be. They were mere molehills compared to the rollercoaster-like roads and white-out conditions he faced back east in Newfoundland and Ontario.

More than 20,000 people were waiting for Fonyo on May 27, 1985 for a nationally televised event at B.C. Place Stadium. He paused at Terry Fox Plaza to place a single white rose beside the memorial arch before walking into the stadium and crossing a giant map of Canada. Just after midnight he was on a Canadian navy ship bound for Victoria and the May 29 finish at Fonyo Beach where he poured out the Atlantic water.

"We had that jar of water, in the motorhome, rolling back and forth. It did change color and got a little gray."

He has returned to Fonyo Beach in Victoria just twice since the end of the run. The first time was with his parents in 1986, before the beginning of the British version of the Journey for Lives. Fonyo interrupted the fundraiser temporarily when it became apparent his 58-year-old father would lose the battle with lung cancer. His death turned the younger Fonyo's life upside down.

"He was a good guy, an honest guy, a hardworking man, I had a real serious problem with it, it screwed me up. He didn't die peacefully, he suffered, that's when a lot of problems started happening, I had to go for counselling for a few years. That's when I lost [fianc,e] Wendy [Reeder]."

Fonyo said his life spiralled out of control in 1988. He cut off friendships and chose to disappear. As a teenager, he conquered the highways of this land on one good leg. As a man, he battled cocaine, booze, financial woes and the law.

"I didn't care about the law," Fonyo remembered. "I didn't care about anything,"

Fonyo was sentenced to six months of electronic monitoring after a 2001 impaired driving conviction. That was almost five years after a judge gave him an 18-month conditional sentence for assault, fraud, theft and weapons offences. He even drove his car over a cliff and into a snowbank near Vernon in a suicide bid. A psychiatrist told a court hearing that Fonyo "was poorly equipped to deal with the celebrity status" that the Journey for Lives brought him.

Counselling helped and so did rediscovering church. Life is better now, but Fonyo realizes he can't run from the past.

"There's a lot of things I'd change, more than one, maybe more than a hundred. I have to live with today and move on; there's always a new day. That's the way it is."

Fonyo is thankful for all the volunteer support during the run 20 years ago, but remains leery of the Canadian Cancer Society's national office in Toronto. He said the society's board of directors reneged on a promise to provide him a new prosthetic leg annually for the rest of his life.

The dispute could be settled soon, according to cancer society chief executive officer Dr. Barbara Whyllie. She admitted there is a written agreement for the society to pay for any repairs or new prosthetic legs, if necessary, and that the matter could be resolved in a matter of weeks. "There is a commitment and we are prepared to live up to the terms of that commitment," Whyllie said from Toronto.

Whyllie claims the society has paid Fonyo's leg repair expenses through 1996, but has not received receipts since. Fonyo disagrees.

"They stopped paying for my leg in 1989, I have no funding, I have a bill outstanding already for leg repair from Award Prosthetics," he said. "If my leg breaks down now, I'm on my ass."

Normandin said Fonyo just wants fair treatment. After all, he did raise \$13 million in donations for the society by running across Canada for 14 months.

"Steve doesn't want to hurt the cancer society," he said. "But he has suffered."

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[back to top](#)

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