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Walking across America: Chicago backpacker with a cause stops in Shawnee to discuss his journey



Photo by Jennifer Bhargava. Enlarge photo.

Frank Chiarelli, of Chicago, examines his water pouch in downtown Shawnee.

By [Jennifer Bhargava](#)

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Frank Chiarelli doesn't want you to follow in his footsteps.

He wants you to be inspired by them.

The 29-year-old Chicago native has spent the past few months walking across the United States, with no plans to stop until he reaches the coast of northern California.

He started back in May from a small historical town in Delaware and last week, he traveled through Shawnee on his journey west.

His message is simple: if he can walk thousands of miles on foot to raise money for inner-city youth, then certainly other people can take a small chunk out of their time to volunteer for the same cause.

His campaign, "7 Million Strides," is focused on raising money for at-risk youth affected by gang violence and drug wars in Chicago.

It is sponsored by the Chicago-based nonprofit organization, Kids Off the Block, Inc., with donations Chiarelli raises going towards programs

for professional development and mentorship.

At most cities he visits, he meets with mayors and other public officials about his cause and seeks leadership advice.

He also seeks out popular destinations in each city, to learn more about its history and meet the locals.



Jacob Zavertnik/Special to the Dispatch

Frank Chiarelli, of Chicago, stopped in Shawnee during his walk across America.

He is currently planning a live-stream fundraiser in which he will walk 24 uninterrupted hours.

To do so, he's been consulting with a physician and preparing physically for that stretch by eating a special diet.

While his journey may seem idealistic, Chiarelli insists it is the hardest thing he has ever done.

"I'm walking eight hours per day," he told the Dispatch. "I'm working harder now than when I had a career where I was making money."

After leaving a cushy job in logistics, he made the decision to go on the grueling adventure by draining out his 401K plan and his savings account.

He mapped out his route based on heavily populated areas where he could more easily find a place to eat and shelter.

Sometimes he receives assistance from local ministerial alliances, which provide him room and board. But other times, he's on his own.

When he's lucky, someone he meets along his journey, such as a journalist or a bartender, will put him up at their home.

When luck isn't on his side, he finds himself sleeping in barns, shelters, and one time, even a fishing boat.

"It's a creative process," he said, with a laugh. "It's interesting."

So far, in addition to the Kansas City area, Chiarelli has stopped in Baltimore, Cincinnati and Louisville.

On his way to Point Reyes National Seashore, his final destination, he plans to stop in cities such as Denver and Salt Lake City.

"I'm nervous about walking out West," he admitted. "I will encounter several days at a time without water or food or shelter because there are a lot of ghost towns in Colorado and Utah and Nevada."

The first half of his journey across the United States hasn't been without complications either.

At one point out east, he was caught in a severe storm where 35 mph winds ripped the stake out of his tent, causing him to get pummeled with rain all night.

From Hermann, Mo., to Portland Mo., a 17-mile stretch, a couple of people decided to tag along with Chiarelli and they all ended up sleeping in a post office with no air conditioning during 102-degree weather, he recalled with a laugh.

But the journey hasn't been without heartwarming moments.

He recalled in Holden, Mo., he walked into the Cowboy Inn, the town hangout, and he sat with a nun for nearly an hour, telling her about his journey. She took \$50 out of her purse and gave it to him.

Another man, who overheard the conversation, walked up and gave him \$20 for the cause.

"These people don't have money to give away," he said. "That kind of generosity keeps me going. It shows me what I'm doing is working."

Another time, he was walking in the wee hours of the morning in a small town in Indiana when a police car pulled up.

Without hesitation, the officers paid for him to stay in a hotel.

"People have gone out of their way to help, which is surprising," he said. "It's restored my faith in humanity."



Photo by [Jennifer Bhargava](#)

Before leaving Shawnee, he filled up on water at Nieman Bay Coffee House, 11101 Johnson Dr.

The journey across the United States has been an emotional one for Chiarelli.

After all, he didn't choose his cause out of thin air.

Like many of the children he is seeking to help, he overcame a dangerous and unstable childhood.

Raised by a single mom in inner-city Chicago, Chiarelli didn't have a solid family structure or faith foundation.

When his mom died when he was 12, he started going down the wrong path, making bad choices.

When his father reappeared in his life, Chiarelli was inspired to turn his life around and he attended college.

After earning his degree, he traveled abroad to places such as Indonesia, Bolivia and Fiji, spending his time dabbling in photography, surfing and mountain climbing.

But it was traveling through small remote mountain villages which opened his eyes.

"There are people all over the world in the same conditions without opportunity, just like families living in inner city Chicago, but the big difference is their families are strong in faith, they have strong work ethic and neighbors support each other," Chiarelli told the Dispatch. "They rely on each other and it creates a strong community, which is something I would love to see in the inner city."

That tightknit communal bond is something he would like to see develop in inner cities across the United States.

He worries that many people don't volunteer in their community, for any cause, because it seems intimidating or like a lot of hard work or time.

Instead of people looking forward to just socializing during the weekend, he wants to see a similar desire for community involvement.

"People don't need to walk around the country, but I want to inspire similar movements," he said. "I want to get people involved in strengthening our inner cities because we can't keep relying on temporary fixes to combat violence anymore. Those are just BandAids on a bullet hole. It starts with getting people involved in their community and changing the culture."

When Chiarelli returns home to Chicago after his journey, he plans to return to his logistics career, but he also plans to dedicate his free time to being a public speaker and mentoring inner-city kids.

He hopes to make it to Point Reyes National Seashore by early December.

You can follow Chiarelli's adventure on Facebook and Instagram by searching the handle @7millionstrides.

Or, check out his website at sevenmillionstrides.com.

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