

How I spent my 30th birthday

by Ashlea Deahl

Last year, a number of my friends proposed glamorous galas to ring in their 30th birthdays, complete with catchy titles like “Thirty, Flirty and Fabulous.” But plans for my own big day had been cemented for years.

They didn’t involve anything lavish. There were no invitations to address, cocktails to mix or

little black dresses to fit into. In fact, I wouldn’t even know anyone at the party I was planning to attend, and my attire would be more about comfort than couture.

My 30th birthday party was a bit unorthodox, because I wasn’t marking the passing of another decade; I was celebrating the fact that I could still walk—something I once thought wouldn’t be part of my future.

Ashlea Deahl celebrated her big 3-0 in an unusual, but fulfilling way.

“I was celebrating the fact that I could still walk—something I once thought wouldn’t be part of my future.”

And walk I did

On October 3–4, I was one of a couple hundred walkers who completed the 50-kilometer Capital Challenge Walk in Washington, D.C. Even though I live in Phoenix, Ariz., I chose the Washington, D.C., walk because of its proximity to my birthday (September 15) and because I have close family in the area.

The approximately 31-mile trek started at George Mason University in Virginia and wove its way through quaint neighborhoods, busy city streets and the symbolic monuments of our nation’s capital.

On the morning of the second day, while everyone was groggily eating breakfast, I met the Society’s CEO, Joyce Nelson, who had been doing Challenge Walks all over the country. I also met several new friends with whom I now keep in touch through e-mail. And, like Joyce, I came away with a few blisters as well.

It was the best birthday gift I could have given myself: a way of honoring my commitment to stay healthy and positive, interacting with others who experience the same struggles and frustrations as I do, and raising money and awareness for the ultimate goal: finding a cure for MS.

How I got there

When I was diagnosed in 2002, my initial reaction was defeat. I was studying journalism at Arizona State University, with big dreams of becoming a magazine



editor and traveling the world. “Not possible with MS—I’ll be in a wheelchair by the time I’m 30,” I thought. As terrifying and palpable as it was to me then, I chuckle at this prediction now.

I spent a solid year after my first flare-up (a nasty bout of double vision) wallowing in the “what-ifs” of my future, refusing medication, and becoming nauseated every time I read, heard or thought about MS.

After a second exacerbation that numbed my hands and the entire lower half of my body, I realized I had to take control of my body and put a stop to my self-pity party. I educated myself about the disease, overhauled my diet and exercise routine, and started self-injecting a disease-modifying drug.



That led to spinning, kick-boxing and yoga classes, surfing lessons, a rather impulsive purchase of a skateboard, and my first marathon in 2005. Once I knew I could do these activities on a somewhat regular basis (fatigue has always been my foe), anything seemed possible.

My new prediction of the future? If—and only if—I ever lose the ability to walk, at least I’ll know that I have done what I could with these legs when I had the chance.

If I could go back in time and visit that fearful 22-year-old looking at her new diagnosis, I would tell her that her life will be fulfilling no matter what her legs can or can’t do. That she’ll become that magazine editor and travel the world, just as she dreamed. I would tell her not to fear the future so much, even if it should involve a wheelchair, scooter or cane. These things won’t change who **she** is.

“And guess what,” I’d say, “you’ll still be walking when you’re 30.” ■

Ashlea Deahl is the editor of **PHOENIX** magazine.

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Challenge Walk is a 2-to-3 day, 30–50 mile walk offered in 10 unique locations across the country. It’s the perfect way to embrace a personal challenge while joining a journey toward a single destination: a world free of MS. For more information visit **ChallengeWalk.org**. No Internet? Call us: 1-800-344-4867. If you’re looking for something less challenging but equally fulfilling, visit **WalkMS.org** to choose from more than 500 Walks.

U.S. Justice Department looks at crime against people with disabilities

The first-ever national study on crime against people with disabilities yields some surprising data. The risk of being a victim of violence was higher for young and middle-aged people with a disability than for non-disabled people in similar age groups. People 65 or older, with or without disability, had the lowest rates.

Violent crime against young women with a disability was almost twice that of women without a disability, but the role of their intimate partners in these crimes was different. Some 16% of injuries to disabled women were done by their intimate partners vs. 27% of injuries to non-disabled women. About one third of all crime victims perceived the offenders to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

The complete report is available at bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/capd07.pdf.

For information about protecting yourself, go to ncpc.org/topics/violent-crime-and-personal-safety/protect-yourself-from-violent-crime, and call the Society at 1-800-344-4867 for referrals to agencies and services in your area. ■

—Greta Herron, publications associate