

MARCH FOR DIABETES

Letter carrier drafts others to help raise money for research



Above: Bob Mandera
Right: Norbert Teklinsky



Bob Mandera has always stepped right into the action. He served two years in the Army, including one year in Vietnam, and became a letter carrier in 1968, the same year he joined both NALC and the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW).

The Pittsburgh, PA Branch 84 member had already been a regular at March of Dimes walks in his city for a few years when his 5-year-old daughter was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes in 1976. "I thought, 'Oh, man, she can't have this. I've got to get a cure. I've got to do something,'" he said.

He immediately turned to the American Diabetes Association. "I joined right away to get information on how to treat her," Mandera said. "And they were having a book sale—paperback sale. They were having bake sales. And I thought, 'We've got to get some real money in here if we're going to cure this thing.'"

By 1977, Mandera had put together an event of his own, founding the "Veterans March for Diabetes" along with fellow Vietnam veteran and Branch 84 member **Norbert Teklinsky**, whose daughter also has diabetes.

Once they got the approval to proceed, they participated in their walk for the first time in fall 1978, walking from Pittsburgh to the shores of Lake Erie over the course of three days. "We set it up, and that's where it started," Mandera said. "I made all the arrangements—called hotels, restaurants, got all the magazines, newspapers, TV—and we ... just took a knapsack and walked 100 miles."

When the walk started out, they began collecting money by per-mile pledges, but they eventually settled on flat donations to make it less complicated. "I approached businesses, and just everybody I knew," Mandera said.

The walk grew as years went by. Soon, they decided to reverse the route from Erie back to Pittsburgh for improved

logistics—and visibility. "That way, we could have a van check on us and carry all our equipment," Mandera said. "And we could have a finish line, because when we got to Erie the first year, there was nobody there. We just got in my wife's station wagon and came home. ... And I said, 'Well, if we reversed it, maybe some people would come out.'"

That proved to be a good idea, as was Teklinsky's suggestion to finish at his post office. "We changed our finish line to the McKnight Post Office in Pittsburgh. And we had a DJ there. We had the postmaster of Pittsburgh, my postmaster, the union president ... and TV was there," Mandera said.

Moreover, he noted, "There were hundreds of people at the finish line. And it really got to be a big deal. People would see us marching down McKnight Road and wonder what's going on. They'd pull in the post office and try to find out. But that's where Norb's idea was. ... He said, 'Why don't we go to the post office and walk down McKnight Road and we'll get all that exposure on a Sunday,' which was an ideal idea. ... It was unbelievable."

When it came to running the program, Mandera relied on his determination and eagerness to learn. "I used to tell people at these diabetes meetings [that] I just learned this because I wanted to cure my daughter, I wanted to raise money," he said. "You learn as you go on, and there are so many good people to help you."

"It just snowballed," Mandera said of the effort.

He also served as chairman for diabetes awareness for his local VFW. "Then they moved me into being the chairman for the Pittsburgh area. Then I became the state chairman for 22 years. So, all that ... brought more money for more posts. Then we had the whole state of Pennsylvania donate," he said.

Mandera always tried to get the point across that diabetes affected them all. "At the time, 25 percent of veterans had diabetes," he said. He'd look around at 600 attendees at meetings and conventions and tell them, "Everybody in this room knows somebody [who] has diabetes.' So, it was starting to sink in, where they're really backing me, which the VFW really jumped aboard, and then the money started really coming in."

There were a few moments that particularly stood out to the carrier over the years with the event.

"We used to pick somebody to walk for every year that had diabetes," Mandera explained. "I found out this little kid in Coraopolis got diabetes when he was 9 months old. I thought, 'Holy mackerel. My daughter was 5, but at least she could tell you when she didn't feel good. But 9 months?'"

He told the family they were walking in honor of him that year. "I didn't expect it, but they came to the finish line," said. "In fact, before the finish line, they were along the road, and they handed me that baby to carry him across the finish line. And I'm thinking, this kid, he was like 10 or 11 months old by then, so I'm carrying him across the finish line. That was the greatest thing."

Another year, a 6- or 7-year-old girl who had diabetes jumped out of a station wagon. "She ran back to the walkers and handed us a \$5 bill. She's like, 'Thank you for walking for me. I have got to beat it.'" the carrier said, adding that the walkers were all in tears. "And you're thinking, 'This is what it's all about.' ... It all hit home."

"There's a million goofy stories—about the guy getting attacked by a hawk, and somebody wants to get a groundhog out of her garage. I don't know who she thought we were," he continued. "One year, somebody

thought we were state workers walking on the road, and they showed us their driveway. It had to be repaired because of the state runoff, or something was eating their driveway up. 'Sir, we are not with the state.' [But] when it comes to a little kid bringing a \$5 [bill], and carrying that baby, it was just unbelievable."

Besides the walk, they would hold other events as well. "They had skate-a-thons where I'd manage them, and I'd get friends that manage the different skate-a-thons. I had all these nights. We got stuffed animals donated, and I had raffles at a car show. Dunk tanks. ... And then they went to candles. I sold candles. I had hot dog sales, had car shows. People would call me and say, 'We're having a car show, Bob. you want to have something in it to raise money for diabetes?' People were so good to me," he said, "like the hotels, the restaurants, they were so good to me. It all worked out. But I always kept pushing that I'm nobody. I'm not having any education. This is all self-taught, because I want to do what I can to help cure diabetes."

Mandera carried mail for 32 years, retiring in 2000, and served as a shop steward for 16 of them. He walked in the event for 25 years before wondering if they should end it, as he had so much trouble walking it during their quarter-century walk in the early 2000s.

"I thought, 'Maybe it's time to quit and just be in the van, be the driver,'" he said, adding that one of the original walkers convinced him to keep it go-

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JAN WALKER/Post-Gazette

Pamela Mandera shares a laugh with her father, Bob, outside their Hampton home.

Hampton dad to walk again against diabetes

By SUSAN MANNELLA
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

Bob Mandera has learned a lot in the past four years.

The Hampton man has learned a lot about diabetes since he found out that his 9-year-old daughter has the disease. He's also learned a lot about comfortable shoes and long-distance walking.

Mandera's knowledge will be put to the test May 9 when, for the third

'We have to do something. You can't just sit back.'"

The Manderas began attending meetings of the American Diabetes Association's local chapter in Oakland to learn more about the disease.

Pamela, a third-grader at Poff Elementary School in Hampton, learned to give herself injections once a day by practicing. "I stuck my stuffed animals first and then I stuck my dad a couple of times," Pamela said. "When I can do

ing. "He talked me into it, and then we went on and did 40 of them."

There were always people who wanted to do the walk over those four decades. Mandera had created a group of parents of diabetic kids in the North Hills of Pittsburgh that grew over the years, and a number of the members were walkers.

"It's crazy, the people we met over the years," Mandera said, including one who had done the Appalachian Trail as well as others from the VFW. "It was wild. We had people from all walks of life. We had doctors, lawyers, dentists."

And sometimes his letter carrier expertise came into play. "One doctor, he was having trouble the last day," Mandera said. "He put these shoes on, and his ankles were killing him."

After observing the man, he encouraged him to change his footwear. "So, he's walking for about an hour," Mandera said, "and he says to me, 'Yeah,

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I feel a lot better.’ I said, ‘I know. I tell everybody [to] try to stay on the level. Don’t get in the berm of the road, way down where you’re pulling your ankles.’ And he said, ‘This is great, Bob.’ And I said, ‘Who’s a doctor here? You’re supposed to know this stuff.’ ”

Teklinsky, who received two Purple Hearts for his military service and who served as a letter carrier for 30 years before retiring in 2015, died in November of last year. Teklinsky was the backbone of the event, Mandera said. “He brought donations in from all different places. He made connections, like watches and stuff to donate or to raffle off. He was a great guy,” he said, adding, “He’d come up with the ideas, and everybody loved him.”

Both carriers were recognized for their actions by NALC, each being named the union’s Humanitarian of the Year—Mandera in 1984, and Teklinsky in 2003.

Though there still is not a cure for diabetes, both Mandera and Teklinsky’s daughters are doing well and thriving. He and Teklinsky put in so much effort over the years because of them, Mandera said.

When the diagnosis happens, “You say, ‘I wish this was me, not my daughter,’ ” the carrier said.

“We made \$2,000 on the first walk, and we thought, ‘Oh, this is so great.’ ” He became discouraged the following year, when they made less, but they persisted.

When they began getting matching funds from the American Diabetes Association, “it really starts snowballing,” Mandera said, “and the VFW caught on. And then they start donating. And I think right now [we’re] at the point of \$3 million raised so far.”

Eight years ago, Mandera moved to Texas, and he thought that that really might be the end of the effort. Instead, they partnered with an established

TV coverage of a recent march



diabetes walk in York, PA, sponsored by the VFW and run by another long-time walker. “I told the VFW, ‘Let’s just transfer all the funds they raised, [and] go to the York walk from now on.’ ... So, they’re keeping it going. They do a minimum of \$25,000 a year.”

Despite the distance, Mandera’s involvement with the effort is far from over. Every year since they’ve stopped their own walk, he calls the ADA’s Virginia headquarters to encourage it to set up a fund to match the York VFW’s funds raised. “I bugged them for months,” he said. “And it’s been working for the last three or four years, where they matched at \$25,000.”

He continued: “I’m in touch with them all the time,” he said. “I’m still a life member of the VFW, and I thought, ‘Well, as long as they’re still doing it, I’m going to help them.’ As long as I know there’s money. I mean, I’m not having fundraisers in Texas, but I’m keeping at getting theirs matched so they can bring that money.”

Mandera says he’s hopeful that letter carriers reading this will think about starting a walk for a cause close to



their hearts in their own communities. Now 80, he hopes that his own effort keeps going and anticipates being able to participate in the 50th walk in a few years. He’s proud of his legacy with the Veterans March for Diabetes and won’t stop helping fund research for a cure.

“It makes me feel good that I’m still bringing money in, even if I have to bug people and get them mad at me,” he said. “I’m not giving up on keeping the money rolling, as long as there’s something going on that I can get involved with.” **PR**