

Local residents walks Bolton perimeter to raise awareness for Crohns disease

Written By ALYSSA PARKHILL

51-year-old Monica Ponziano has been living with Crohns Disease for the past 30 years.

Crohns and Colitis are diseases that affect the lining of the body's ability to digest food, gather nutrition and eliminate waste in an easy and healthy manner. They are inflammatory bowel diseases (IBD), which can cause large amounts of pain to any part of the digestive tract.

This includes the mouth, esophagus, stomach, small and large intestine and colon.

"The pain is excruciating. Absolutely excruciating," said Ponziano. "A lot of people don't see us at our worst."

Ponziano is a volunteer at Crohns and Colitis Canada and works on the education and awareness committee. She was recently hospitalized, after engaging in a walk around Bolton.

She was inspired by a couple who walked the perimeter of Toronto to raise funds for the Canadian Red Cross and COVID-19 and decided to organize her own adventure.

"I just moved to Bolton four years ago, I used to live in Toronto," she explained. "I wanted to get to know the town that I was living in. This year I started walking a little bit here and there, and the more I started walking, the more I started getting in touch with nature, I didn't realize it was in my backyard. I just fell in love with the paths, the scenery and everything about it."

Her inspiration also came from the annual Crohns and Colitis Gutsy Walk, which is held in August every year. Due to the pandemic, the walk is still on, but has transitioned to a virtual format.

She began by googling the perimeter and planning the best route for her to take. With the pandemic in place, and having to stay at home, the walk was the perfect idea for Monica to get out of the house, to train and to challenge herself.

"It took me three tries to do it. The first time I did it, I got to Coleraine and King and almost passed out by dehydration. I decided to go the other route, going North up to Columbia Way. By the time I got up to Columbia Way and Queen St, I was so tired and out of breath," she described. "The third time, I made sure I had enough fluids with me and the stars lined up, everything was good. My stomach was in good order. I went out, and I conquered it."

She decided that her Bolton walk was the beginning of her working up to the August 23 Gutsy Walk, where she can raise funds for awareness for Crohns and Colitis Canada. But she hit a bump in the road shortly after her adventure.

"I was actually sick during the time I was doing all this, but I kept putting it off thinking maybe I'll get better. But I was getting worse and worse, and then on July 8, I had no choice, but to go to the hospital," said Ponziano. "The doctors were trying not to do surgery again, because I've already had three surgeries for my Crohns."

Ponziano has been living with Crohns disease for three decades and calls herself a "professional patient".

"At the beginning, when I was first diagnosed at 21, I didn't know much about the disease. There was no internet at the time, and there was really nobody you could talk to. I had my first operation back then and I thought at the time "I had my operation, I'll be great," Ponziano described. "I was great for a long time, and then little did I know, it did come back, and there's no cure for it whatsoever. We just live with it, and we learn to live with it. It's why I call myself a professional patient, because I know my way around a hospital blindfolded."

Ponziano had a close to traumatic experience here in Bolton recently, when she was denied access to a washroom at a local coffee shop. She was experiencing extreme pain, and was in desperate need of a washroom, when the coffee shop employee wouldn't let her use one of the washrooms.

She was able to talk to the owner; whose only solution was to offer her a free coffee.

?I want people to be aware of these things, and I just want to be out there in the community, because there's 270,000 people across Canada that do have this disease, and doctors and experts say by 2030, there will be 400,000 people who have Crohns and Colitis,? said Ponziano. ?I also want to raise awareness to also reach out to our community of young kids, and the kids in high school. Because during an age where you might think of a stomach-ache as a stomach-ache, that stomach-ache turns into something totally different, and they don't know what they're dealing with.?

Ponziano is hoping to continue her treks around Bolton, preparing for the August 23 Gutsy Walk. She hopes to be able to reach out to the community with awareness and education for the Caledon community as well as the younger generations.

For more information, visit crohnsandcolitis.ca.