

Running 4D

By Molly Lemke
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It began as a favor to a friend. Now, the 4D journey has taken on a life of its own.

A year ago, Jeff Fazio began running for his own health and well-being. It was running for someone else, though, that changed everything. Since June 2013, Fazio has run a 5k race in 40 states. He hopes to reach number 50 by the time the year mark has rolled around, so that he can bring it home to the person who was the inspiration for this journey.

Dee Gerber, who works in the Accounts Payable office at HACC, knew of Fazio because of his work in Student Life; their paths often crossed when student clubs ran into financial snafus. "Last spring when I started running, I was talking to Dee almost every Monday, because every weekend we had a club issue with payments," Fazio says. The two ended up becoming Facebook friends. "She started 'Like'ing all my running activity, which honestly at the time was kind of awkward. I knew enough of her to know she couldn't walk, she was in her scooter one day, and the other day she had leg braces on but I didn't know why — I didn't know what her situation was."

Gerber's inability to run is the result of being born with a rare disease. The symptoms appeared early on. "I was slow with my milestones," she says. "I was late walking, not able to climb stairs, just general weakness." After going to multiple hospitals, the doctors concluded that Gerber would be "a vegetable by the time [she] was a teenager. Luckily," says Gerber, "my mom wouldn't accept that." Her mother insisted on more tests, resulting in the diagnosis that Dee lives with today: muscular dystrophy, or MD.

"MD is a rare disorder," she says. "Doing some research on my own, looking things up, I never realized how rare it really is, I guess, because when you grow up with it you hear it all the time, and you just assume people know. But you can't assume, because people don't know." Gerber says she gets around HACC fine, though with the remodeling going on around the Ted Lick Administration Center, she's had to be sure to remind people of the spaces a scooter can fit through. However, something about Fazio's running got her thinking. In early June, Fazio received an email from her asking, hey, are you running this weekend? "I said, 'Yeah, I'm doing a 5k here in Harrisburg' — it was my third 5k here — and she said, 'Can you do me a favor?' She just said, 'Can you think about me and all the other people who can't run when you get to that first mile?'"

Gerber recalls, "I figured, you know, if he was running and I couldn't run...we didn't really know each other really well at that point, so I was really hesitant about doing it. I kept deleting the email, then I'd write it and I'd delete it, but what the heck, I was either going to send it and he was going to say 'Yeah' or I was going to send it and he was going to say I was crazy. But he didn't." In fact, Fazio



Speaking about 4D and the 50-state mission at the Latonia 5K in Covington, Kentucky

promised not only to think of them on the first mile, but every mile.

The night before the race, Fazio printed out a piece of paper that read 4D — For Dee — and pinned it to his jersey before the run began, so that it would be visible in photos. "That event was the first event I ran that had a hill in it, and it was a pretty big hill," he says. "I hadn't trained on hills, I didn't prepare for hills — I didn't know it was a thing that people did! I was pretty much dying on that hill. This young gal goes running past me, and on the back of her tank top it says, 'Some girls chase boys, I pass them,' and I'm like, that's just really deflating on so many levels. I started thinking that I had no reason to be here."

He decided to quit, but on thinking about the rest of his day, remembered his plans to tag Dee in photos of the race. "Then I started thinking about how awful this run was, but the fact that I had a choice to do it, and I felt frankly kind of selfish that I was going to give up because it was hard when other people couldn't even choose to do it." With that in mind, he finished the race.

The next step was more of a leap. Two weeks later, Fazio signed up for a 5k in the Bronx. The inspiration that appeared at the registration booth may have arrived from the same source that caused Gerber to send her email, because Fazio has no explanation for it. The woman at Registration asked him why he was there. Fazio says, "I just blurted out that I was running a 5k in all 50 states. I just thought, at that moment, this would be cool to do, 'cause it was kind of neat being somewhere different. She called the race director over, and there was suddenly this commotion, and they're like, 'So how many states have you done?' I said, 'Uh, one?' Then they looked at me like oh yeah, right, you're running all 50 states."

As it turned out, he was. After talking it over with Dee, Fazio threw himself into scheduling races. "By August I was planning events out, and I was realizing I was doing two, three states in a weekend. I realized at that time that



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on January 1 I'd run my 25th state, and that's 6 months in. So I got excited. I said to Dee, 'Wow, I think I can do 25 states in 6 months, that's half the country in half a year. I think I'm going to try and do this in a year.' Now it's 9 months in, and Fazio has raced in 40 states so far. The last 10 are booked, needing only some finalizing details.

Gerber is not keeping idle while in Pennsylvania, either. "She is definitely an equal partner in this whole experience," says Fazio. "She keeps saying I'm the 4, I keep saying she's the D." Before Fazio lands in a state, Gerber is touching base with local newspapers, TV stations, MDA clinics, and anyone else who might have an interest, to let them know about the mission. She has also had a hand in finding him places to stay, which turned out to be problematic when it came to Texas.

"Where he was running was very close to where my aunt and uncle live," she says. So she got in contact, and her relatives agreed to host Fazio for the night.

"He called me and is like, 'They wanna run with me.' And I'm like, 'Okay! That's awesome.' He said, 'No, there's a problem.' I ask him what it is, and he's like, 'It's a nude run.'"

Gerber's response: "OH. Oh. Oh, my." Then she rallied, told him her aunt and uncle are "very open-minded individuals," and advised him to just spill the beans. "Well, he did tell them, and they opted not to run, but they wished him well."

Fazio has run plenty of normal races, but there have been some peculiar ones along the way. For "Movember" he grew a moustache and beard and participated in a

"Stache Dash" in Wisconsin. At the "Mock the Clock" event in Washington, he started running at 1:50 AM and finished at 1:15 AM (hint: it was November 3). There was a "neon glow" run at night, the Pennsylvania Warrior Dash with a military-style obstacle course, and of course, the run at a nudist resort in Texas. "I was sort of specifically looking for leadership lessons, so pushing yourself, like how far are you willing to go to support your cause, how far out of your comfort zone are you willing to push yourself for a specific mission?"

During the past 9 months, both Gerber and Fazio say they have been in contact constantly. She keeps him awake on long drives. He supplies her with photos and descriptions of the places he's seeing. "A lot of times you can sense the excitement through the text," she says. "I would like to tell you how many texts and messages [we've exchanged], but I don't think I can count that high. He definitely keeps me a part of being there, even though I'm stuck here."

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For his part, Fazio says that Gerber is always there in spirit. "It isn't just that first hill that Dee has gotten me up," he says. "There's just been some truly awful runs out there, and whenever it gets horrible, I get to thinking about Dee and I start putting that in perspective. No matter how bad it is, it can't be as challenging as what she has to do every day just to park and come in to work, so who am I to complain? She inspires me a lot, and keeps me

moving forward at a lot of times when I would probably have given up on my own."

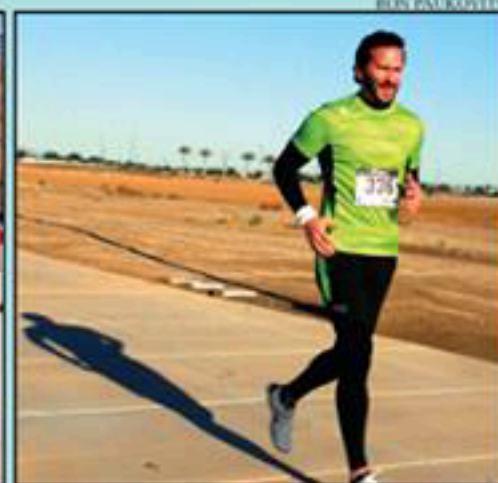
They have both been hoping that Gerber will be able to attend one of the runs in person. The finances and practicalities of the matter have proven tricky so far. Gerber says she was hoping to be in attendance at the 50th state — Hawaii — but the expense now has them looking at the 49th, Alaska, instead. She has family living there, "so I'd get to see some family, get to see him run, and get to see Alaska."

Fazio says that running for 4D has been "a very multi-layered experience." The first layer, he says, is running for Dee as well as for others with muscular dystrophy; the "D" in 4D now stands for both. The second is "the running, and trying to be fit and healthy, trying to improve my times and get better and faster as I go." A third layer is the travel. "I never thought about seeing the country like this," he says. While the races take about 2 hours at the most, that leaves the rest of the time to go sight-seeing. Fazio refers to what he's seen as "state appetizers," but on the 4D journey he's been able to visit places like Mount Rushmore, the Badlands, and Yellowstone National Park.

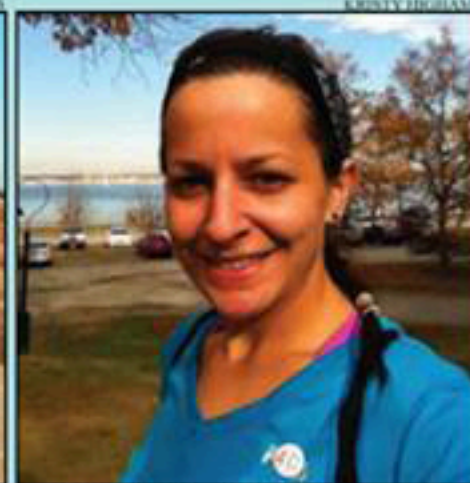
According to Fazio, "the fourth layer has been people and meeting other runners, meeting people through this website called CouchSurfing, which is where I've been finding places to stay for free, and that has been absolutely fascinating." The free part is pretty important. Though he's been careful about spending, the venture to date has cost more than \$16,000 dollars from his own finances, and he anticipates the last leg may set him back about \$5,000 more. However, he says, "If I had a million dollars in the bank right now, I would couch surf whenever I traveled anywhere. He's stayed with married couples, single folks, foreigners... "It's been such an odd mix of



Jeff is interviewed for WHBF Channel 4 in De Witt, Iowa.



Taken in Goodyear, Arizona at the Jingle Run.



Jeff: "[Kristy Higham] was the first person in the country to run a marathon with a 4D pin on."

people, but there's this common thread to just helping a stranger and being willing to meet somebody on that level. You're not going to meet these people anywhere else but couch surfing," he says, recalling a night he slept in the same room with four other travelers: one from Ecuador, one from Brazil, one from Korea, and one from Japan.

Though 4D is clearly a complex beast, the clearest threads are those that connect Fazio and Gerber, and the people that Fazio has met all over the country. Sometime

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during the year, Fazio mentioned to Gerber "how awesome it would be to just get a whole bunch of people to come to one run...and then I said, 'In a fantasy world, it would be great if we had our own event, but how is that ever going to happen?'"

So, welcome to Fantasyland, because this year is the inaugural year of the 4D 5K, which will be held June 29 in Lebanon, PA. Both online and paper sign-ups are now open at 4d5k.org. Proceeds from registrations will be going to support the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA). "Sign up!" Gerber urges. "It'll mark exactly one year since he started this 4D journey, so it would be cool to have a bunch of people there and run to continue the support, continue the effort to spread the awareness and raise money for MDA."

This experience, they say, has been life-changing. "I think what blows my mind is when this started, him and I didn't know

each other," says Gerber. "So here's this guy I work with, and we're kind of friends but I don't really, really know him, and all of a sudden, going from 'Yeah, I'll think of you when I do this first run,' to sending pictures with the 4D label, to, 'I'm doing a 5k in all 50 states, it was just...' She grasps for words to encompass the emotional impact. "It puts faith back in humanity, you know, that there are really good people, and he is definitely beyond a good person. And the support from other people, complete strangers, that just hear their story and wanna help...I think nowadays you need to see more of that, instead of all the bad that's always around."

Fazio has taken lessons he's learned through couch surfing, running, and traveling, and turned them into a leadership presentation, parts of which he has already given at places like Temple University. He is also 31 chapters into a book about the experience. While speaking about his book, Fazio noted that the proceeds are going to go towards MDA. "All of this, at some point, has to keep coming back to that," he says.

In that spirit, Gerber has the final word. "We need awareness. We really need awareness, you know, to realize that this is out here and it's affecting people. You hear about ALS, which is also under the blanket of muscular dystrophy, that is stealing peoples' lives; these people that were active, vibrant people, and it's stealing their lives from them."

"A lot of people that think about MD, they think of kids — but we grow. We're of all ages, and all ethnic backgrounds, and from all over the world. Like cancer, it shows no mercy to anyone."



Ready for the Glow Trot in Maryville, Tennessee.