

COVER STORY

Students, teacher walk half marathon for Charity Drive

ERIN YARNALL, Editor

Walking more than thirteen miles, through six cities and villages is a large effort for anyone.

Factor in the snow and bad weather that February brings, and what eight Highland Park High School students, along with their physics teacher Kunal Pujara did was quite the feat.

The group trudged through slushy sidewalks and snowpiles as they followed Green Bay Road through Evanston, Winnetka, Kenilworth, Winnetka and Glencoe, eventually reaching Highland Park, and ultimately, Highland Park High School.

"It was just difficult walking on the sidewalks, but it was a great accomplishment for all of the students. None of them had gone 13 miles in any form," Pujara said. "We mostly stayed on Green Bay, except when there were parts of Green Bay just north of Lake Cook where it was too hard to get on the sidewalk, so we took St. Johns the rest of the way to Highland Park."

The group took on the lengthy walk as part of Highland Park High School's annual Charity Drive, in which the school

hosts a series of fundraisers, all raising money for one charity.

This year, the beneficiary of Charity Drive is Rainbows for All Children, a charity dedicated to providing support for young people who are suffering from a loss — whether their loss is from death, divorce, deployment, incarceration, deportation or a life-altering illness.

"These are small organizations, and it really is like the tipping point for them," Pujara said. "Highland Park usually picks an organization, not a huge one like the American Red Cross, which has huge donors, but a small place, like Rainbows for All Children, which makes a huge difference for them."

Pujara holds a half marathon event of some sort every year for Charity Drive, and has since 2011. From 2011 to 2015, the event was a half marathon run, but since 2016, Pujara and his students have walked the 13.1-mile distance.

"Some of the girls were on the cross country and track teams, and they told us exactly when we were in Highland Park," Pujara said. "From the school, they knew exactly where the three-mile mark was



Highland Park High School students and teacher Kunal Pujara (third from left) meet with Rainbows for All Children's Stephanie Garrity (behind Pujara) and Paula Carter (second from left) Feb. 18 at Rainbows for All Children in Evanston. PHOTOS BY NICOLE CARROW/2ND CENTURY MEDIA

along the Green Bay trail. They felt accomplished."

He said it was "great" to see his students dedicated to the walk, as with their additional outreach, the group could fundraise more money.

"I'm limited to the students who are in my classes and their parents," Pujara said. "They feel a wonderful sense of accomplishment when they see how much we raise as a group."

Due to the cold temperatures during the walk, the group stopped at a Walgreens along their route to buy handwarmers because the students' hands were cold, according to Pujara.



Josh Gross (left) and Benny Cohen (right) show their makeshift weather-proofed sneakers (lined with plastic bags).

The students who participated weren't only generous with their fundraising efforts, but also with one another throughout the walk. According to Pujara, the eight students shared the sets of handwarmers purchased at Walgreens.

They also made time to stop at a Starbucks and a Winnetka McDonald's for lunch.

Due to warming temperatures, Pujara said the students didn't stop after their lunch break, continuing to make their way toward the school.

"It was cold at the beginning of the day, and the sidewalks weren't as clear, so it was more challenging

on the ankles, but after that it was smooth sailing," Pujara said.

A highlight of the walk was when Stephanie Garrity, the executive director of Rainbows for All Children joined the group for the last four miles of the walk.

"It was nice to have the director of Rainbows walk the path with us," Pujara said. "The kids got to see the Rainbows facility, meet the people who work there, and it was just nice for the students to see what kind of impact their fundraising was doing."

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