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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 2, 2015

FreeWalkers to Reprise Historic RFK 50-Mile Kennedy Walk

GREAT FALLS, MD - On Saturday, February 7, 2015, Ray Smith of Shady Side, Maryland, and his co-leader, Paul Kiczek, of Morris Township, New Jersey plan to travel 50 miles by foot in one day. They will walk from Great Falls, Maryland to Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, along the banks of the Potomac River on the C&O Towpath. They have now turned the long, one-day challenge into a group event in the 3rd Annual reprise of a challenging walk that moved a nation 52 years ago.

In 1963, our President, John F. Kennedy, challenged his military leaders to march 50 miles to prove they were as fit as those that served in 1908 under President Theodore Roosevelt, who had originally issued a similar order. But, JFK also passed that challenge to others by making it known that his White House staff should lead by example. The idea of a 50-mile hike suddenly became a popular one-day endurance feat. It seemed to perfectly reflect a nation seeking challenge and displaying a growing interest in physical fitness. And so, a short-lived long distance walking fad was born that swept the nation, at least for half that year, with thousands walking extreme distances to prove something to themselves and others.

JFK's brother, Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy, was never one to turn down a good challenge. On February 9, 1963, a mere three days after JFK made known his idea, Bobby became the first of thousands that were to walk 50 miles that year. His feat was all the more special as he trekked for 17 hours and 50 minutes in a pair of dress shoes on the C&O Canal towpath, facing cold winter weather, and without training. He would outlast four staffers, his dog, and several not-so-intrepid reporters finishing the feat alone in the dark at Harpers Ferry.

Kiczek, 15 years old at the time, was among the many Americans that took up the original challenge. His experience in walking a long distance at a young age, led him to form a social network of fellow long distance walking enthusiasts five years ago called the FreeWalkers. Kiczek senses many parallels between that watershed year of 1963 and our present challenges in 2015. "At that time (1963) we had military threats, a recession, racial and religious tensions and public health and fitness issues too. Yet, we seemed to be able to take positive action toward solving those problems, led by a charismatic president that seemed to be able to overcome any obstacle." said Kiczek.

Smith, is FreeWalkers' Washington DC Director and a Certified Interpretive Guide. He has extensive experience leading local walking groups in the area and has participated in many large-scale, walking events in Europe and feels that the same interest can happen here. Smith says, "Walking has a special significance in most of the European countries. They have long coveted the challenge and social experience of walking with hundreds of people in an organized event."

For the past two years, this challenge has captured the imagination of an enthusiastic group of 40 as they trekked the same route along the Potomac. You join can join the event or learn more about it and its history at <http://kennedy50.org>. All are welcome to join the FreeWalkers as they walk the same 50-mile path as RFK in a new effort to channel the memory and experience of a grand physical challenge.



Robert F. Kennedy with wife Ethel applying a foot massage at Camp David. February 9, 1963, "The Big Walk," Life Magazine 2/22/63



Hearty hikers at Great Falls Tavern start of the 2013 50-Mile Kennedy Walk.