"How to Succeed in 500,000 Easy Steps - an Interview with Mike Ortega"
By Ana Maria Flannigan

In June Mike Ortega competed in a 6-day walk/run challenge and finished in 4th place. Who were the first 3 winners? Seasoned racers who travel the country participating in events like this. Why did he decide to take on such a difficult challenge and how did he do so well? I sat down with him to find out.

"Three years ago I was heavier and not feeling too good" he says showing me a picture of himself with Jim V. and Governor Brewer which he keeps in his office as a reminder. "I don't want to be that guy again". It was time for a lifestyle makeover.

"One pound equals 3,500 kilocalories, divided by 7 that's 500 kilocalories. If I increase my activity by 15 minutes and decrease my caloric intake by 300 kilocalories I can lose a pound per week". You can tell this is a numbers guy. So Mike continued walking, then jogging, then running every other day. Now he trains at 5:00 am, either running up D Hill or swimming laps at the Aquatic Center. He stopped drinking sodas and eating the afternoon bag of M&Ms. He watches his portions. "I don't obsess about food, I eat what I want but in moderation".

Since that picture was taken Mike has lost 30 lbs.

But what attracts him to grueling, extreme events? The goal of the 6-day race is to walk/run as many laps of the course as you can for the duration of the event. Mike got up at 4:00 am to walk before work, and then repeated the task after work. He averaged 25 miles per day for six consecutive days.

What does he get out of these events? They appeal to his competitive spirit and his disciplined nature. "I feel good afterwards, and the doctor says I'm doing great. It's a stress release and it gives me a chance to think about work. It challenges me."

Another reason to enjoy the race was being able to train and compete with his daughter, Lauren, who walked 80.25 miles. He's very proud of her hard work and achievement and is a huge believer in families working out together and supporting each other's wellness efforts. He loves spending time with his family and used to coach soccer just to be around them.

The 6-day race was also an opportunity to learn new things. Mike read a lot about nutrition, hydration, and race tips. He talked with the veteran racers as he went around the course, gleaning valuable insights.

He practiced what he learned, drinking a bottle of water every mile and a half, eating granolas and bananas to maintain his energy, and replenishing electrolytes with Gatorade after his walks. He also learned to take care of his feet. It took him 40 minutes before each walk to prepare his feet with mole skin and special tape and he lovingly propped them up after each walking bout.

So what's next for Mike Ortega? The Bisbee Thousand and the Grand Canyon. Sounds challenging and extreme. But he makes training a game that he enjoys, "I think like a healthy person".