

Going the Distance in the Desert

BY WENDY HAAF

Photo courtesy of Dr. Mehmet Danis



Dr. Mehmet Danis (DDS'05) still gets choked up when he talks about the heartbreaking stories his wife, a dietitian, brought home after working with low-income breastfeeding moms. "I was shocked that these stories were from Canada," recalls Captain Danis, a Canadian Forces dentist stationed in Toronto. "And I was embarrassed by the fact that I didn't know this, and by the fact it was happening to begin with."

The experience got Danis thinking. While he wanted to help, writing a cheque didn't provide anywhere near the kind of satisfaction his spouse derived from her labours. Could he do something similarly fulfilling, that would also give back to the community? Maybe he could convince others to follow his example, creating a snowball effect. Giving might even prove so addictive that one day, western society would measure success not by money or material goods, but by how much we help others.

Unreasonable goals? Perhaps. So it was only fitting that Danis find an unreasonable way of trying to achieve them. Through a chance conversation a few years ago he learned about adventure races – gruelling seven-day, 250-km treks across the desert. "I thought, that's impossible. You can't run across a desert," he says. Nonetheless, he decided to see if he could jog half the 40 km endurance racers cover per day. While he had to walk the final 5 km, he completed 20 km. Maybe, with seven months left to train, he could finish the 2007 Gobi March.

So Danis forked over the fee and reserved a spot, as did his close friend and former classmate, Dr. Ashkan

Mokhtari (DDS'05). Danis placed sixth in a field of 185. Having torn a calf muscle during training, Mokhtari walked every last hot, dusty step. What's more, the dental duo raised \$4,500 for United Way and attracted a fair amount of media attention.

Now in shape, Danis wasn't about to quit. In April 2009, he and Mokhtari ran across Chile's Atacama Desert against 83 competitors, including several professional ultra-marathoners. This time, Danis won, bringing in \$6,500 for charity. (Mokhtari came 23rd). Not wasting any time basking in his victory, Danis plans to run the Sahara Race in Egypt in October, and another in Australia next year.

When he crossed the finish line he urged his competitors: "Don't forget, when you had peanuts and one set of underwear left, you were probably way happier than you were with your cars and your plasma TV. Spread that message and maybe we can create a culture where we can spend less, and be happy more." ☺

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