



# He walks 4,265km to conquer Pacific Crest Trail

Prasatt Arumugam, the first S'porean to do so, did this from July to Dec last year to raise funds for Children's Cancer Foundation

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**T**HE trail stretches from Canada to Mexico and it takes the entire snow-free season to walk the distance of 4,265km. This is roughly equivalent to the distance between Singapore and China.

Mr Prasatt Arumugam did the trek from July to December last year, walking through parched desserts and icy mountain passes stretching from the US border with Canada in Washington and ending near the border with Mexico in California.

According to him, fewer than half of hikers who attempt the trail complete it.

Mr Prasatt is the first Singaporean to conquer the trail, after walking more than 40km daily for five months.

What kept the 26-year-old going was his campaign to raise funds for the Children's Cancer Foundation (CCF).

The English Literature graduate from the National University of Singapore left his job as a tutor at The Learning Lab in July last year to undertake the social initiative he named TrekInvicta to raise awareness and funds for CCF for which he volunteers.

The name TrekInvicta is inspired by his favourite poem — Invictus.

He saved up while he was working to fund the trek while the National University of Singapore Society (NUSS) and the National Youth Council also helped pay for his expenses.

For every mile he walked on the

Pacific Crest Trail, he had a goal to raise \$10 and so he came up with a target of \$26,660. He exceeded the target, raising \$47,131 from the campaign.

Mr Prasatt created a campaign page on GIVEasia where people could donate. People also donated directly to CCF via cheques where they were required to state a fundraising code associated with TrekInvicta.

He first heard about the Pacific Crest Trail when he was on a student exchange trip at Yale University in 2013. During the trip, he visited Yosemite National Park (one of the parks on the trail) and liked it.

He read up about it and found out that it was one of many parks on the trail. It intrigued him that the trail covers a diverse range of terrain, from deserts to mountain passes, to meadows and river crossings.

Said Mr Prasatt: "No one from Singapore had completed the Pacific Crest Trail before. Not surprising given that it is said that more people have conquered Mount Everest than done the trail. I thought it was time Singapore put its mark on the long-distance hiking map. Furthermore, the challenging nature of the trail parallels the difficulties that the children undergo and that was another factor for my choice to hike on the particular trail."

Mr Prasatt is no stranger to treks. He has hiked on the Annapurna Circuit in Nepal, known as a teahouse trek.

He said: "The altitude demands were more on that trek but the actual physical demands in terms of

amount climbed and distance travelled on the Pacific Crest Trail far exceeds that."

Mr Prasatt flew to Seattle and started at Hart's Pass in Washington on July 16 and finished his trek at Campo near the US-Mexico border on Dec 9.

He prepared for the trek by climbing flights of stairs at places such as Pinnacle@Duxton, Mount Faber and Bukit Timah.

He did this for at least two hours every day, with trekking poles in hand and a loaded backpack.

## Challenges abound

Even after all that, the Pacific Crest Trail was tough.

"Exhaustion, running low on food and water and coping with the high altitude and extreme weather conditions, you name it," said Mr Prasatt, referring to the challenges he faced on the trip.

Mr Prasatt, who slept in his tent or in motels, told tabla! that his meals consisted of Pop Tarts for breakfast, and a selection of 10 to 12 energy bars that he ate throughout the day. At night, he stopped for a more substantial dinner — ramen, mashed potatoes or instant rice with tuna. He would carry a few days worth of food with him, bought from shops in towns he passed.

He was faced with an alarming situation once when he was in a town called Chester in North California, while he was stocking up on his food supplies and taking shelter from a storm. While the particular incident made him feel helpless and anxious, in hindsight, he was glad

he experienced the difficulty, "or I would not have had the chance to meet such beautiful souls".

Said Mr Prasatt: "I was sheltering in town while the first storm blew over — the next one was to come two days later, so I had a one day buffer to get as far ahead as I could on the trail before the second one hit. I had already been delayed by bad weather prior to this, and was anxious to get a move on."

"There was no real transport option — no bus, no taxi, and the place I had to get to was not on a well-travelled route. I tried asking everywhere to see if anyone knew how I could leave town — my motel, stores and such — but to no avail."

By this point, he said he was getting desperate as he did not want to spend more days not hiking.

"I then remembered that the local Plumas Bank has a visitor's centre. I walked in and someone asked me if I needed help. I then said that I was hiking the trail and was trying to find my way out of town before the storm hit. I shared that I had tried asking in many places but had no luck. Then it seemed like many among the staff stopped what they were doing and made calls to people they knew who could help."

"Eventually, one of them — Ms Amy Jarrad — found someone who was more than willing to go out of her way to give me a ride. They could have easily said no like the others, but there was this deep well of kindness here. Amy even asked me more about from where I was and why I hiked, and she seemed moved by the story." She



## Aunt's death drew him to volunteering



Younger times... Mr Prasatt with his late aunt. PHOTO: TREKINVICTA

MR PRASATT started volunteering with the CCF after losing his aunt to a cancer relapse in 2010.

She was like a second mother to him and he said "it was heartbreaking seeing her go in such a painful manner". That drew him to the cause.

A few times each month, he engages in distraction play therapy at the Playroom at the National University Hospital Medical Centre for children visiting the hospital for tests, treatments and consultations.

It prevents them from associating the place with pain and discomfort and gives them something to look forward to.

He shaved his hair for Hair for Hope in 2015 but felt that he had more to give to CCF.

Said Mr Prasatt: "While volunteering at CCF, I was inspired by the children who battle their illness with such courage, despite their young age. I felt that I wanted to do something to help them, given how much they deserve long and healthy lives."

"It occurred to me that a long trek would be a good parallel to the children's own long road to recovery. And through this, it seemed I could help raise awareness and funds for them."



A meaningful trek... (Far left) Mr Prasatt gazing at the Crater Lake in Oregon, (above right) his friends and family saw him off at the airport before he left for the trek. (Above) Mr Prasatt at the Sequoia National Park in California, (left) at the US-Mexico border and (inset) cooking instant rice. PHOTOS: TREKINVICTA

then found him on Facebook and sent him a message of encouragement and promised to donate.

"The help came at a very low point in my hike — a point where I was uncertain if I could complete the trail. As I walked out of the bank, I was suddenly overwhelmed by the kindness I had received and broke down. Not sadness but tears of joy. Till then I had been cursing my luck, but perhaps if things hadn't been as hard as they had been, I would not have had the chance to meet such beautiful souls," he said.

On the trail at the southern California section, he met another hiker, Matthew Robert Stearns, who was hiking with his brother.

Mr Prasatt and the Stearns brothers hiked through the last part of the trail of 500 miles and reached the Mexican border together on Dec 9.

Said Mr Stearns: "We hiked through a lot of snow during our time together. It was Prasatt's first experience in the snow, but we are used to it as we live in Pennsylvania. So we helped him with that, and we all battled the cold together for a lot of the final 500 miles. We also had to deal with several trail closures, which are places where the trail is destroyed from fire most of the time, and in these cases you have to walk around the section via forest roads, creating an additional navigation challenge."

Mr Stearns said he found it "extremely admirable that someone from so far away, from such a different climate" decided to hike the trail.

He added: "The trail is extremely difficult, but to do it as a foreigner and someone not used to mountains and snow is courageous. That fact that he was able to raise money through his hike and connect more with the children that he works with is a tremendous thing."

## A strong spirit

When Mr Prasatt was in the second month of his trek, he experienced dizziness and often felt light head-

ed.

He visited a clinic in Ashland, Oregon, where doctors ran some tests and found that he had a heart murmur.

"They said I should stop hiking but I felt I couldn't stop, not after coming all the way here. Instead, I took the potassium supplements that they prescribed and carried on," said Mr Prasatt, admitting that he felt very scared as all sorts of worst case scenarios with regard to his health flashed through his mind.

But his determination saw him through, and he completed the trek successfully. He will be receiving a medal from the Pacific Crest Trail Association.

After he completed the trek, he flew to Los Angeles, where he stayed with a friend for a few days, before taking a flight back to Singapore.

Said executive director of CCF Neo Lay Tin: "He was resolute in helping CCF raise funds and awareness of childhood cancer despite the harsh weather conditions and challenging terrains that he had to endure during the expedition. His perseverance and determination in overcoming the odds have definitely inspired children and young people to continue braving their battles against cancer."

Mr Prasatt, who has just started his full-time job as an English Literature teacher at a secondary school, said: "The Pacific Crest Trail was an immense challenge that saw me hike across an entire country through rough terrain and harsh weather for five months. The journey of children fighting cancer is far longer and harder. If I as a healthy individual could not have overcome the challenges I faced alone, what more these children?"

Said CEO of NUSS Roy Higgs: "NUSS is glad to have been able to support Mr Prasatt's meaningful expedition to raise funds for CCF. His courage and resilience to complete the trek clearly display a strong character of giving among a new generation of young adults."

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