

Two-day journey fundraising for those in need

by Ann Packer

Stew Sexton (*right*) has climbed the Great Wall of China, been elephant trekking in Thailand and tackled the Annapurna Circuit in Nepal. Closer to home, he's run the Hawkes Bay marathon and completed the Alps to Ocean event in the South Island.

Locals will recognise him as the guy with the bandanna in the wheelchair – the scarf stops sweat getting in his eyes, he says. He had a “brilliant” lockdown, making the most of emptier roads.

Training hard when Covid-19 hit last year, Mr Sexton was thwarted in his first bid to participate in an international ultra-marathon in Bali, in support of a charity for Balinese children. The event has been postponed again this year, so now he's set himself a new challenge – an event inspired by ultra-endurance athlete David Goggins. The event, a 4x4x48, will see him run four miles (6.4 km) every four hours over two days with limited sleep, again in support of the Balinese charity. He plans to start at 6 pm on October 28 and finish just after 7 pm on October 30.

Born with spina bifida, Mr Sexton has never allowed his disability to get in the way of an adventure. “If someone tells me I can't do something, I feel challenged to do it,” he says. That there were five kids at his Masterton

school all making the transition from calipers and crutches to wheelchairs – “so much faster to get around” – may have helped in his early years. His first job was as a chef, fulfilling a dream he'd had from age 12; after training at Wellington Polytechnic, he'd use bar stools to get up to the bench, then graduated to a standup wheelchair. Cooking remains one of his greatest loves.

Building a fully accessible home at Windy Point, with the help of brothers Andrew Sexton, an architect, and builder brother Richard, has given him full independence – he tells a story about how in his 40s he was finally able to drive home with his supermarket shopping, park, go upstairs in the lift and unload groceries into the fridge – all without help.

As a teen growing up, Mr Sexton was very active. But in midlife, unfit and overweight, it was a friend's death, following a fall from a wheelchair during the Hawkes Bay marathon, that spurred him on to bike the Alps to Ocean cycle trail with a bunch of friends. While doing that he was offered a place in the Hawkes Bay marathon, which he first ran in 2019. Then he applied to join the Bali Hope Ultra, which starts off running up the side of a volcano. Participants must raise AU\$5000.

Mr Sexton's consultancy business puts ability before disability – hence the name AbilityDis. His latest job, with Capital and



Coast DHB, has seen him working to ensure that vaccination centres are accessible for all people and this includes a drive-through event for more than 7000 people in one week at the Stadium, and smaller events for people with special needs, such as low sensory environments (no music, low light, vaccinators with no perfume) and the Deaf community.

To donate to Mr Sexton's latest challenge, where \$25 feeds a Balinese family for a month, go to fundraise.balichildrenfoundation.org/fundraisers/stewabilitydisbiz