Fitness journey leads lawman to new heights

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The latest segment in a local lawman's journey toward a healthy lifestyle was completed earlier this month in Omaha.

Knox County Sheriff Don Henery completed the Trek up the Tower, a stair-climbing fitness event sponsored by WELLCOM, a non-profit company that provides Midwest employers of all sizes wellness programming.

Along with 1,830 others from across the county, Henery climbed the stairs of Omaha's tallest building, the First National Tower. Participants in the Feb. 16 trek ranged from elite athletes, who raced to the top in less than five minutes - to those, like Henery, looking to accomplish a personal goal as they made their way up the stairs at a slower pace.

"It's a great self motivator and when you're done, while on the 40th floor looking out over Omaha, it gives you a sense of accomplishment," Henery said. "It also feels great to achieve the goal you set for yourself - while you're standing outside on the sidewalk looking up at the First National Bank Tower and realize you ran up all the way to the top of it."

He said the only negative aspect is waiting a whole year to improve his time.

The event kicked off with first responders making their way up the stairs, before other participants were sent off in waves, to avoid congestion in the tower stairways. The average time taken to climb the 633-foot tall tower – 870 steps up 40 stories - was 12 minutes and 15 seconds, while first-place winner Jason Larson completed the climb in 4:49.

Henery's time this year, his fifth trek, was 11:15, putting him in the top 38 percent, 687th of the 1,831 participants who finished the climb.

Henery is contemplating raising the bar next year - to take on the "vertical-mile" challenge, 10.3 trips up the stairway.

This year, 30 male and 11 female trekkers accomplished the feat, with times varying from 58:51 to 2:44:49.

A new record for the most climbs was set this year, at 19 and two-thirds.

The Knox County lawman said his journey to the trek began in March 2012, when "weighing 298 pounds and trying to chase an escapee on foot."

"During the chase, I was too slow and lost sight of the prisoner, who then stole a SUV and tried to escape in it, almost running over my brother, who is my chief deputy, in the process," he said. "I promised myself I would never allow that to happen again."

Diagnosed with both "pre-diabetes and pre-hypertension," he had been advised by his physician to change his lifestyle.

He joined Weight Watchers, learned to eat healthy and began an exercise routine, now running 5K (3.1 miles) five days a week.

"For law enforcement it (work day) varies depending on the calls to service," Henery said. "I normally start my personal day at 4:45 a.m., so I can work out before, hopefully, any law enforcement activities start for the day."

To prepare for the tower climb, he also trained at the Santee Wellness Center, beginning in early December.

Henery also participates in several 5K, 10K and half marathons in Nebraska and South Dakota each year and participates in an on-site wellness program provided to Knox County employees.

"We have even talked about having an area for fitness workouts for county employees," the sheriff said.

During his 37 years in law enforcement and more than eight years as sheriff, Henery has seen his share of foot pursuits. He was involved in two, each covering more than three miles, over steep, hilly countryside near the Missouri River, during the last two years, with no ill health effects.

He recently completed a health-check program through an area health care facility, called Planet Health that includes heart and vascular screenings, risk assessment and education.

He recommends a program like Planet Health to provide benchmarks and measure progress.

"I am above normal/average for my age group," he said. "So the fitness routine has paid off greatly!"

KNOX COUNTY SHERIFF DON HENERY takes a selfie in front of the First National Tower, after completing the Trek up the Tower in Omaha on Feb. 16.