

50 MILES WITH MY DAD



It's a decade since an epic walking challenge raised £20k for charity and set the course for May de la Rue's life. Now she's told the story in a book about the experience

WORDS: Jayne Lindill

Back in 2009, ten-year-old May de la Rue and her father, Colin, set out to walk the entire coast of Suffolk together.

Their aim was to cover 50 miles from Felixstowe to Lowestoft, bit by bit, over eight weeks in the school holidays and at weekends.

For Colin it was a welcome opportunity to catch up with his youngest child. For the busy lawyer, pressure of work and a daily commute to London from their home in Melton, meant there was never enough time to spend with his family.

For May it was an adventure with her dad, which became a journey of discovery in memory of a much-loved aunt she had recently lost to suicide. It would also be the catalyst for an ongoing charity endeavour, raising thousands of pounds for local causes. Ultimately, it would set the course of May's future life.

Now, a decade later, she is sharing her experience in a book called *Fifty Miles with my Dad*, which she hopes will raise money for charity and inspire others on the road to philanthropy.

The book is May's recollection of her journey – the excitement and suspense, the fun and enjoyment, the people she met along the way and the sense of purpose and fulfilment she gained from the challenge. With a cover illustration by local artist Allan Williams, the book is also a portrait of coastal Suffolk, its cultural and natural heritage.

It will be launched on April 7 and available in bookshops from April 8. Proceeds will support the growth of a charity endowment fund with Suffolk Community Foundation established initially with money raised from the trek. The Fifty Miles with my Dad Fund benefits charities and community groups that support people with disability, and those who are infirm or vulnerable.

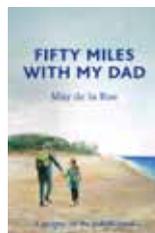
May is understandably excited about the release of the book. It's



Photo: TFS Photo Woodbridge

ABOVE:
May and Colin de la Rue.

LEFT AND BELOW
Ten-year-old May on the trail walk.



Fifty Miles with my Dad has a cover illustration by Allan Williams

written in her name, although she's quick to point out that it was her dad's idea and his view that the story should be told from her perspective. Her memories of the walk are strong but, as she says in her preface, the photos Colin took, the diary he kept and the notes he made, particularly of conversations along the way, are what gave them their first draft.

A decade later, May is sitting in the Fluders Hotel in Felixstowe, where as an excited ten-year-old she ate lunch with her dad at the beginning of their trek.

She is now a self-assured young woman, a medical student on her way to becoming a doctor, realising an ambition born out of the walk that also has roots in childhood experiences she shared

with her beloved aunt.

"My aunt Emma passed away that summer [2009] and I wanted to do something to remember her by," says May. "She really meant a lot to me. She was a nurse, full of life and very outdoorsy. I did a lot of things with her, like canoeing, and the first time I spent the night in a tent was with her."

With this in mind, Colin suggested he and May go on a walk together and spend the night in a tent. Unbeknown to May, it was a little test, to see how far she was prepared to go.

'The book is May's recollection – the people she met and the sense of purpose and fulfilment'

"We started at Felixstowe and camped at Shingle Street," Colin recalls. "We'd had a great day, and May had gone the distance without any problems. So, as we sat reflecting on the day's walk, I suggested we could keep going and walk the whole coast path."

The idea of turning it into a fundraising challenge in aid of her aunt was irresistible to May, especially when she heard that any amounts raised would be matched by the government's Grassroots Challenge scheme,



Photo: Colin de la Rue

in force at the time. A total of £20,000 would be enough for SCF to invest as a permanent endowment fund, using the income to provide grants to local charities and community groups, so £10,000 became May's target. It was an ambitious goal for a ten-year-old's sponsored walk, but thanks to publicity and generous support it was reached in the last hour of her trek.

Her first visit to the type of charity that would benefit from the fund was Riding for the Disabled. Others followed as May's interest in philanthropy developed and she saw what it could achieve. Through seeing

'The whole experience shaped my life. . . the way I saw the world'

their work at first hand, she got to meet young people of a similar age to her with disabilities and illnesses that prevented them from leading normal, active lives.

One who made a big impact was a girl who had Perthes' disease, a rare childhood condition that affects the hip joint. "We were able to fund her travel costs and enable her to go swimming regularly, which helped her recovery," says May. "Meeting her made me realise, as a young child, how lucky I was not only to be able to do the walk in first place, but also to get out and about and do so many other things." This young awakening also made her something of an advocate for young philanthropy. "It's not just the people in need who benefit from fundraising,"

Find out more

Fifty Miles with my Dad,

by May de la Rue, is available in bookshops from April 8 (hardback, 50 colour plates, £18).

Net proceeds from the sale of the book will support the growth of the Fifty Miles with my Dad Fund at Suffolk Community Foundation.

For more details see maydelarue.com.

she says, "the donors are also making their own journey. The whole experience shaped my life. Meeting children who were less fortunate than me had a positive impact on the way I saw the world and led me to medicine as a career.

"I really hope that the book inspires young people to get involved in charity work and see how little is sometimes needed to make a difference. It has had a far greater impact on my life than I realised at the time."

It's not just May who has felt the profound effects of the challenge she took on. For Colin too the experience has been life-changing.

"Working in the City I used to leave before May got up and got home after she went to bed," says Colin. "The walk convinced me of the importance of quality time, and that I'd be happier spending more of it with my family." Now semi-retired, Colin works from home and he and

May spend more time together, enjoying especially their common interests in music. And he's taken on other challenges. Always a keen mountaineer, he took a sabbatical from work to climb eight mountains in eight months, ending in the Himalayas.

Producing *Fifty Miles with my Dad* has also opened up new interests in publishing. Colin has established his own company, Sarnia House, and is planning other projects.

Meanwhile, May will continue on her path to becoming a doctor and pursuing her philanthropy interests. One of the great benefits of a permanent endowment is that it can keep growing through investment. The 'Fifty Miles' fund was recently valued at nearly double its original size, having provided grants of over £10,000, and it is expected to be worth well over £0.5 million long before May retires. It can go so much further than May's 50 miles with her dad. ♦

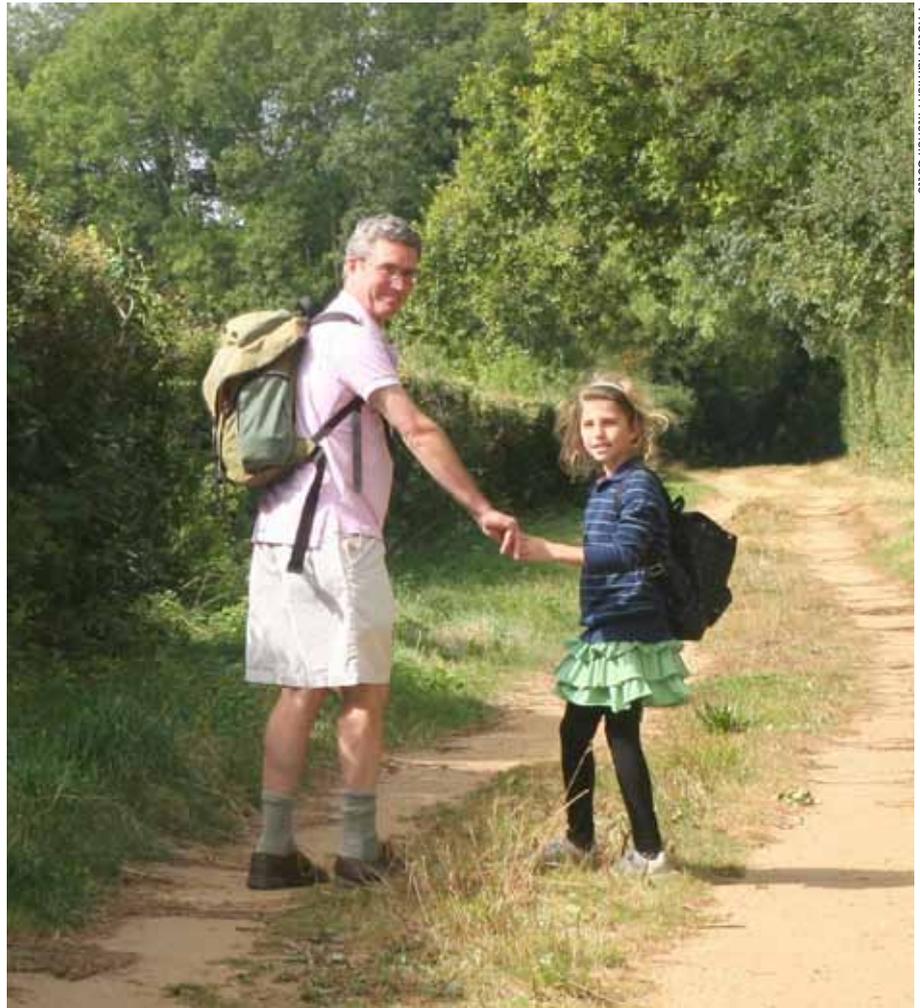


Photo: Hamish Mitchell/Cotts

ABOVE: Colin and May stepping out towards the £10,000 target.

BELOW: May made headlines in the *East Anglian Daily Times*

