Walk the Talk

Academic puts rubbers to road

July 1, 1999 By Gabi Horn

At 5-feet tall and 260 pounds, Dr. John Chittick isn't your average marathon man, but for the next year the academic, who wrote his 1994 Harvard PhD thesis on teens and AIDS, will cover five continents preaching prevention to youth. On the road since February, Chittick, 50, estimates that by July 2000—when he'll cross the finish line in Durban, South Africa, to attend the 13th annual World AIDS Conference—he'll have walked 1,800 miles. When POZ *caught up with Chittick in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, he was just hitting his stride.*

How do you get people's attention?
I'm a walking billboard. People think it's funny when they see a short, fat guy in a bright Hawaiian shirt coming down the road, and always ask what I'm doing here. Then they see I'm a foreigner who respects their culture rather than trying to tell them that America is No. 1.

You're on quite an odyssey. What inspired it?
My colleagues read papers and talk to each other, but with young people you have to get out and talk to them. Professional AIDS workers must take their knowledge to the street. If I can do it—a guy in my physical shape who had quadruple bypass surgery five years ago—anyone can.

What's your outreach style?
I joke around a lot, and use psychology. I ask teens about their plans for the future, then tell them, "If you get HIV, you'll have fewer opportunities to make those dreams come true." That tends to work.

What's paving your way financially?
Private donations—government money comes with too many strings attached. Sometimes police aren't so keen on an American wandering around with a satellite phone, sometimes I'm denied permission to enter a school. When that happens, I just keep walking.

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