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Dear Captain Sir Thomas Moore — Smerconish

Steven Biondolillo August 3, 2020

4-5 minutes

Dear Captain Sir Thomas Moore:

While we on this side of the pond are unable to bestow upon you Knighthood, we are nevertheless able to confer what we hope you will feel is meaningful recognition for your wonderful humanitarian achievement. Americans created and brought to scale the form of fundraising that you employed so successfully to raise almost 33 million pounds for NHS Charities: the ubiquitous and useful "walkathon." Hence, we are able to coronate you "Walk King," and do so with humility and respect.

Some history: walkathons have a two-part genesis. In the late 1960s, a series of "crop walks" was organized by churches throughout the U.S. to raise money to combat local hunger. These fundraising walks--the largest of which by 1984 was annually raising \$500,000--were the outgrowth of the political protest marching that characterized, in part, 1960s America. Taking to the streets to "change society" had morphed into taking to them to make a focused, practical difference.

Then, in 1970, a U.S.-based NGO called the March of Dimes

adopted the fundraising technique to support its critical work saving the lives of babies, thereby introducing walkathons into the public health sector, with which they are now virtually synonymous. The well-known Frank Cotham cartoon, perhaps, says it best: a doctor speaking with his patient, whose caption reads, "You probably already know this disease from the walkathon of the same name."

For many years, the majority of America's leading special-event fundraisers have been walkathons, the largest of which annually raise between \$60 million and \$300 million to fund research, public education, advocacy, and direct services. At peak, the U.S. walkathon market generated \$2 billion per year. Nowadays, it's generating less than \$1.5 billion, which is why your achievement is so significant and timely.

As history tells, the walkathon field exploded in the mid-1980s, and public health issues, one after the other, stepped into public view. On the heels of hunger and birth defects came AIDS, breast cancer, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, leukemia-lymphoma, heart disease, diabetes, Alzheimer's, and others. Yet, for reasons revolving around generational change and technological disruption, as well as the loss of leadership, walkathons are generating less nowadays.

Enter the mother of all public health issues--global pandemic. How to respond? Who will lead the way?

Enter Captain Tom Moore, the U.K.'s most seasoned squire, who, in an epic campaign, showed the entire world how Covid-19 could be fought and, potentially, conquered. His sword: the walkathon--in his grasp as brilliantly burnished as it was in olden days!

Sir, research shows that, since the pandemic's outbreak, your fundraising campaign on behalf of NHS Charities has raised more money to fight Covid-19 than any hospital system in the U.S. You've both made a stunning practical difference and set an example of individual initiative unlikely to be matched anytime soon.

The quintessential achievement of walkathons (and similar fundraisers such as bike-a-thons, climb-a-thons, dance marathons, and the like) is that citizens of modest means have become bona fide philanthropists. Because walkathon participants gather from friends, family members, neighbors, co-workers and others small contributions to support critical causes, the world is now teeming with regular folks raising tens of thousands of dollars. Few, however, raise tens of millions!

As a longstanding fundraising professional, I can assure you that your achievement has re-set the bar for the entire walkathon world. And no small world it is. Even today almost one in seven Americans participates, volunteers or makes a financial contribution in a walkathon. That would be 45+ million Americans on whose behalf I would like to thank you for singlehandedly revitalizing what for 50+ years has been the world's most productive form of grassroots action!

We Yanks are singing your praise, Sir. And though a cultural misappropriation we might make, nevertheless we sing, Long live Captain Tom, Long live the Walk King!

Respectfully,

Steven H. Biondolillo



Steven H. Biondolillo is the founder and president of Biondolillo Associates, Inc., a marketing and development consulting firm dedicated to helping nonprofit organizations build special-events and other creative fundraising programs. Biondolillo is widely recognized both for sparking the national renaissance in walkathons and other peer-to-peer fundraisers, and for coining the term "signature event." Additionally, he has developed what is regarded to be the nation's premiere training program in the field of special-event fundraising. Fundraisers developed by Biondolillo have raised over \$1.4 billion.

Biondolillo was an elite freestyle wrestler and medalist in national and international competition. He was a member of the coaching staff of Boston College's NCAA Division 1 wrestling program. His op-ed pieces on amateur sports and child welfare have appeared in publications throughout the United States, including The Wall Street Journal, Chicago Tribune, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Miami Herald, Philadelphia Inquirer, Boston Herald, New York Daily News, Boston Business Journal and Union Leader. The third edition of his book, *Macaroni and Cheese Manifesto*, which Biondolillo uses in team building programs and retreats, was published in 2018.

Biondolillo completed graduate work in English Literature at McGill University and language studies at the University of Grenoble. He received his BA in English Language & Literature from Boston University, where he was president of the National Senior Honor Society and all-university valedictorian. He is also a graduate of the U.S. Army War College's National Security Seminar.

In 2013 Biondolillo was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame as an "Outstanding American from Massachusetts."