

Mile Zero hero

'Steve Fonyo's face is the face of a cancer survivor and a hero, and it should be celebrated'

by Aaron Williams

May 29 marks the 20th anniversary of an important event in Canadian history, but there will be no fanfare or celebration. May 29 marks the date that the black sheep of Canadian heroes completed a journey that is beyond comprehension. A plaque at "Mile 0" recalls the details:

In commemoration of Stephen Fonyo's run across Canada to raise money on behalf of the Canadian Cancer Society, for cancer education, patient care and research. His "Journey for Lives" covered nearly 8,000 kilometers, starting in St.

John's Newfoundland, March 31st 1984, and was completed here May 29th 1985.

Although the "Journey for Lives" followed in the footsteps of Terry Fox's "The Marathon of Hope," the legacies of Fonyo and Fox are as distinct as Hunter S. Thompson and Martin Luther King.

Although Fox was just 18 when cancer was discovered in his right leg, he already had developed the inner strength of a determined athlete. Inspired by his dream to run across Canada, Fox began months of intensive training.

Fate struck even earlier for Fonyo, with a cancerous tumor forming in

his left leg by age 12. The young amputee then endured two long years of chemotherapy, tears and phantom pain. Fonyo grew up watching Terry Fox, but nobody will fully understand which dreams, or nightmares, prompted his epic adventure.

Fox began the "Marathon of Hope" by dipping his artificial limb into the Atlantic Ocean. Venturing west, he nobly accepted every challenge, and bravely underscored the purpose of his quest with heartfelt speeches imploring every Canadian to follow their dreams and to contribute to cancer research. By the time he reached Thunder Bay, can-

cer had invaded his lungs. Fox returned to B.C. a national hero.

Fonyo began five years later, facing a public that did not want to see him succeed, or even attempt his journey. He became known as a nonconformist teenager, someone who liked to party and cuss. It was not until Fonyo reached Thunder Bay that public perception began to change. After 14 long months, including a relapse scare and a winter in the prairies, Fonyo completed Fox's dream by dipping his artificial limb into Pacific waters at what is now Steve Fonyo beach in Victoria.

Unfortunately, life had another twist for Fonyo. The Order of Cana-

da recipient slipped into drug and alcohol abuse, and his father passed away from cancer. He reached rock bottom in 1996, when he was handed an 18-month conditional sentence for charges ranging from theft to assault with a deadly weapon.

But this does not discount Fonyo from deserving our respect. The interest alone from his campaign was enough to start the Canadian chapter of the Candlelighters Childhood Cancer Foundation. Tarnished as his reputation might be, Steve Fonyo's face is the face of a cancer survivor and a hero, and it should be celebrated.