Fitzgerald, Osierfield Citizens Help ‘Carry The Load’ from New York to Dallas

TIFTON—For Jo Leigh Warren, it was the heart-breaking story on the other side of her camera. For Lyndsey Walters, it was buying a boatload of bananas. For John Driscoll, it was the headstones at Arlington National Cemetery. But no matter the circumstances, these three representatives from Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College would not be deterred. It was their time to “Carry The Load.”

Warren, Walters, and Driscoll were three of the nine people from ABAC who participated in the nationwide “Carry The Load” relay which is an effort designed to restore the true meaning to Memorial Day by connecting Americans to the sacrifices of the military, law enforcement, firefighters, and rescue personnel.

Dill Driscoll conceived the idea of a national relay for “Carry The Load” three years ago. He and his wife, Susan, are the deans of the Stafford School of Business at ABAC. Through the help of national sponsors, Driscoll and the other organizers developed a relay from West Point, N.Y., to Dallas, Texas. This year’s event kicked off on April 29 and reached Dallas on May 25.
For 2,000 miles, participants carried the American flag and the “Carry The Load” flag 24 hours a day.

“This was far and away our best year,” Driscoll said. “These kids have given me renewed faith in America. All of these ABAC students who were a part of the Relay were in real life situations. This was the real world. We picked these kids and trained them. They were ready.”

Driscoll knows of which he speaks. He and his marketing company were in charge of the 1996 Olympic Torch Relay from Los Angeles to Atlanta. Susan Driscoll, a Coca-Cola marketing executive at the time, met Dill on that trip. The Driscolls, who live in Osierfield, have coordinated eight other Olympic Torch relays since 1996.

Driscoll predicts “Carry The Load” will be bigger and better in 2015. He believes the common theme of “who are you carrying?” resonates with the American public. Most Americans have relatives who have served their country either in the military or as first responders.

Besides Warren and John Driscoll, ABAC students making the trip included Demarcus Bateman, a business major from Ashburn; Rodney Troupe, a business major from Moultrie; Kristoff Cohran, a business major from Thomasville; Matthew Reid, a business major from Eatonton; and Matt Fryman, a business major from Kennesaw.

Dill Driscoll and Walters, the internship and placement coordinator from the Stafford School of Business at ABAC, also made the trek which really started for the ABAC group with a special six-hour walk-off ceremony on the ABAC campus on April 24. It ended when 5,000 people welcomed the “Carry The Load” team to Reverchon Park in Dallas.
Warren, who assisted Reid with media coordination, will never forget walking into New York City.

“It was amazing,” Warren, an ABAC journalism major, said. “Before the relay, I was looking forward to seeing all the different places but once the trip got started, it was really the people and their stories that stuck with me.”

For John Driscoll, it was the final trek into Dallas that sticks in his mind as well as Arlington National Cemetery.

“That last day when we were walking into Dallas was huge,” Driscoll, Dill’s son, said. “We knew what we were walking for but when we got to Dallas, it really hit home. Seeing that sea of graves at Arlington was another time that was just an incredible experience.”

Walters was the operations manager for the trip. She did everything from finding fire stations where the students could take a shower to making daily trips to the grocery store.

“From feeding to cleansing, anything that needed to be done for those 14 people on that bus, I took care of it,” Walters said. “We always stayed ahead of the bus because we had to get ready for the next day. We bought a lot of bananas, cold cuts, and peanut butter and jelly. When they saw me coming, they knew the ‘banana boat’ had arrived.”

Walters, who lives in Fitzgerald but is moving to Savannah this summer to attend law school, combed the stores along the route for Mother’s Day cards, belts, socks, toothbrushes, and even hair gel. She couldn’t have done it without the GPS app on her phone.
“I know where every Whole Foods is between New York and Texas,” Walters said. “I even had to find a bike shop so we could keep the bikes going. I can tell you that Jo Leigh and I played a lot of loud music at night to keep us going.”

The group traveled from 60 to 150 miles a day. All the leg captains walked a couple of two-hour shifts every day. At night, some of the leg captains and Dill Driscoll rode bicycles to cover more ground. All the males slept on the bus. Walters and Warren stayed mostly at La Quinta hotels, one of the national sponsors for “Carry the Load.”

John Driscoll, an ABAC business major, was one of the leg captains on the trip. He walked daily from 2-4 a.m. and then again from 6-8 a.m.

“It was awesome,” Driscoll said. “I think this trip strengthened my character. We all got to know each other really well. The leg captains were all about safety, security, and smiles.”

Warren and Reid produced over 30 videos and shot hundreds of pictures during the trip. They had over 2,300 followers on Twitter and about 10,000 likes on Facebook. Every post that they made reached over 1,000 people with some reaching over 2,000. The faces behind the stories had the most impact on her.

“For those people who lost family members, it wasn’t just about walking with us,” Warren said. “It was a healing process for them. Hearing all the stories about what these people did to protect me, my family, and my country was amazing. I can’t believe the selflessness of these people.”
Walters, Dill Driscoll and all the ABAC students on the journey spent a lot of time listening to men, women, and children who lost loved ones who were involved in the military or as firemen, policemen, or first responders.

“I don’t believe Americans appreciate the military and these first responders enough,” Walters said. “I don’t think we realize the sacrifices these people make every day. Hearing them made me put my little problems into a different perspective.”

For these nine ABAC representatives, Memorial Day will never be the same.

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