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TUESDAY, August 29, 2006

www.sentinelandenterprise.com

2 Sections, 24 Pages 50 cents

Leominster native to 'Go Forward' in support of MS



Ken Gagne talks about participating in the MS Challenge Walk at his parents' Leominster home, Monday afternoon.

Will participate in three-day walk to raise money in honor of mother

By Marisa Donelan
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LEOMINSTER — Ken Gagne wears a dog tag with a Superman logo on it.

The symbol of the Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation has the words "Go Forward" engraved on the back.

"That's what you have to do when you're faced with something," he said Monday. "You can either let it rule over you, or you can live with it."

The 27-year-old Worcester

resident and Leominster native is going forward with an arduous 50-mile walk next month to raise money for multiple sclerosis research in honor of his mother Jane, who suffers from MS.

The three-day National Multiple Sclerosis Society MS Challenge Walk will take him on a loop around Cape Cod, beginning in Hyannis on Sept. 8, Gagne said.

He will join hundreds of MS patients, their friends and families for the second time.

No one will be racing, all walkers are bused to a point half a mile from the finish line so they can cross at the same time.

"Whether you can just make five miles or 25 ..." Gagne said. "Everybody walks the last half mile together."

Gagne has raised more than \$3,000 to date for this year's walk by soliciting donations from his coworkers, friends and family, he said.

Please see WALK / A7

Man taking 50-mile walk in support of MS

WALK / From Page A1

The money will go toward research for preventing and stopping the progression of MS, he said.

Jane Gagne, 61, said Monday the disease makes her "not very graceful."

She first noticed signs of a problem when her vision started to fail in 1990 and their family physician referred her to a neurologist.

"They really thought it was a brain tumor," she said. "And it was just MS. I was so glad it wasn't a brain tumor."

Ken Gagne said his mother's MS is not noticeable, but the disease has rendered other people immobile.

"That's the great and terrible thing about MS, that it affects everyone differently," he said.

MS affects more than

400,000 people in the United States, and is caused by a degradation in the myelin sheath, a protein that surrounds all the nerves in the body.

"You lose the ability to send impulses from your brain to your body," Ken Gagne said.

His mother has days when she feels unbalanced and wobbles into doorframes in the Leominster home she shares with her husband, Edward Gagne.

But thanks to a drug called Betaseron, the progression of her disease has been tolerable, she said.

"I was diagnosed 16 years ago ... I started the Betaseron four years later," she said. "I had to get into a lottery because they were just starting to produce the drug. But I'm doing great, I really am,

you know."

Edward Gagne said the every-other-day injection made his wife sick in the beginning, but since she became accustomed to it, she has reaped the benefits of living a normal life with MS.

"We've been very, very fortunate that it hasn't been as progressive or aggressive as it could be, because of the Betaseron," he said. "The whole purpose is to slow the progression of MS down so that you die with it, not from it."

The couple, who have four grown sons, celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary Sunday, and Jane Gagne said she's looking forward to another four decades with her husband.

"We've had 40 wonderful,

wonderful years," she said. "My only complaint is that it's gone by too fast."

She is proud of her son's efforts to raise money for MS studies.

"He's doing a fantastic thing," she said.

Ken Gagne said he will welcome any additional donations.

"I'm asking a lot of people to make whatever donation they can ... I'm not looking for a big corporation to donate \$500," he said. "It doesn't matter how much you give. You're showing support, and that's all that matters."

Readers can donate to Ken Gagne's MS Challenge Walk by sending checks made out to "NMSS" to 20 Elbridge St., Worcester, Ma., 01609, or by visiting his Web site: tinyurl.com/kmqbd.