



*(Photo: EMILY VARISCO/ SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL)*

Herbert Langerman of north Wilmington has no appetite for jetting around the world.

The 83-year-old prefers to walk it.

Wearing his sturdy Reeboks, Langerman, a Korean War veteran, claims to have walked more than 25,000 miles -- equal to once around the equator -- over nearly a quarter-century.

He has accomplished this by walking in circles around the same half-mile track in Bonsall Park.

That feat helped Langerman secure a spot in the latest tome of oddities by Ripley's Believe It or Not!: "Reality Shock!" (2014, Ripley Entertainment).

Released in September and sold in 10 countries, the book features more than 1,000 far-fetched marvels from around the world, including a flat-faced cat from Chengdu, China, and a Midwestern woman who injected her buttocks 1,000 times to achieve the ultimate "brickhouse." 34-23-45.

Langerman is the only Delawarean of the bunch and he campaigned hard for six years to be acknowledged in the Hall of Fame of wackiness. Ripley's editor Edward Meyer initially told him his story didn't warrant a mention, Langerman says. But the retired lab tech continued to pester him for two years by phone.

Meyer, Ripley's vice president for exhibits and archives, remembers things differently.

He says he expressed interest in Langerman's globe-trotting from the start, but needed independent confirmation.

"We're cautious about people self-promoting," he explains.

The longtime Ripley's editor admits that several previous honorees have literally walked around the world. But that shouldn't overshadow Langerman's achievement.

"It's about human determination," he says. "And that's what Ripley's is all about -- accomplishments small and large."

One of Meyer's favorite accomplishments can be found on page 71, which highlights a former paratrooper from Germany who has lived among a pack of wolves for 40 years. An accompanying photograph shows a bearded man wearing camouflage about to sink his teeth into a dead deer while a few wolves wait patiently.

On page 124, a 56-year-old grandmother from Houston models her 18-inch fingernails, grown over two decades, noting that she can no longer wash dishes.

Langerman's two-sentence entry (no picture) is on page 181, following a Brit who bounced four miles on a space hopper toy, and before another Brit who ran 69 miles along Hadrian's Wall in north England, wearing a full Roman Centurion costume.

Walking on the sabbath

What began for Langerman as "something to do" to lift himself out of mourning the loss of his wife became a test of will.

"I didn't take the Sabbath off," he recalls. "I just thought that, someday, there's got to be gold at the end of the rainbow."

Recognizing he would never make it into Guinness World Records, Langerman set his sights on Ripley's. In 2008, he nominated himself, enclosing three letters from members of his walking group -- two are now deceased -- along with his detailed calculations:

4 miles a day x 7 days a week x 50 weeks a year x 18 years = 25,200 miles.

Langerman shaved two weeks off each year to account for a one-time attack of the flu, vacations to Florida and Delaware beaches and icy days when he strolled around Concord Mall. He believes that's being generous.

Testimonials describe Langerman as single-minded in his pursuit, walking for an hour beginning at around 9 a.m. every day of the week. If he missed a day, he would make up the miles. While other walkers moved to retirement homes or moved on period, Langerman soldiered on.

"Herbie is religious about walking his four miles every day," says Stanley Cear, 78, who walked with Langerman for about 15 years before moving to Florida. "Some days, I had to change the oil."

Cear recalls discussing normal "men's BS" with Langerman, such as the latest Phillies' or Eagles' mishaps. When Langerman asked Cear to vouch for him with Ripley's, Cear thought he had no chance but agreed to write a letter of support.

"I figured, 'Well, he's got a point,'" Cear remembers. "Let's see what happens."

To measure his distance precisely, Langerman wore a pedometer and rolled a surveyor's wheel around the track. He also persuaded county employees to drive him around in their truck while he monitored the odometer.

Ripley's has used DNA testing and carbon dating to verify submissions, Meyer says. That wasn't necessary in Langerman's case.

"We pride ourselves on everything being absolutely true – in spite of our name," he says.

Ripley's didn't tell Langerman that he made the cut this year. The News Journal notified him last month after receiving a press statement.

Initially enthusiastic, Langerman tried to shrug off the accolade in a later interview.

"There's other people that have done this," he said. "It's no big deal."

That didn't stop him from rushing to Barnes & Noble to buy one copy for himself and one for each of his daughters.

A tall drink of water

Langerman began walking in 1990, almost one year to the day of his wife's death. They were married for 29 years.

In the late 1950s, a friend introduced Herbert to Evelyn, a graduate of Girls' High in Philadelphia and an assistant at the phone company.

Most important, she was tall. Langerman, a former high school basketball player, towers above six feet.

Before meeting Evelyn, Langerman had been stationed in Japan as a military policeman with the U.S. Air Force. He enlisted for three years at the age of 17, convinced that there was no other path.

Growing up in a family of six living on welfare in South Philadelphia, he remembers dumpster-diving for Whitman's Chocolates next to the factory. He was the last boy to wear traditional knickers in his junior high class.

With the outbreak of the Korean War, Langerman's military service was extended by nine months. He returned to Philly before he could legally drink, and enrolled in electrical engineering at Penn State. He flunked out after a year.

Soon after, he took a job at an adhesives manufacturer, inspecting gummy mixtures for stability.

During one of their early dates, Langerman recalls that tall Evelyn tried to drink him under the table.

She failed, but won his heart.

Within two years, the pair married and moved to the Germantown section of Philadelphia to a one-bedroom apartment on Carnation Street with half-price phone service, thanks to Evelyn's employer. Herbert wore his inexhaustible supply of military uniforms to work and returned home caked in cement.

In 1961, the couple moved to New Castle so Herbert could start work as a technician for Avisun, producing polypropylene.

Later, they moved to a ranch in Claymont, and then to a three-bedroom home in Brandywine to accommodate their two daughters.

For 23 years, Herbert worked long hours as a specialist in gas chromatography for Atlas Chemical, which became part of AstraZeneca. He recalls analyzing Mylanta to ensure it was synthesizing properly. On the side, he worked part-time selling small appliances at Sears, where Evelyn also worked, and repaired homes in the neighborhood.

The day after Herbert retired from Atlas, Evelyn felt a lump in her breast.

What followed were "26 months of hell," he recalls, until Evelyn succumbed in 1989. She was 50 years old.

Herbert was left angry and bitter. For a year, he barely left the house.

Then, at the urging of his friends, he hit the track. He heard there was a group of about 10 World War II veterans and their wives who walked every morning at Bonsall Park

At first, Herbert walked alone or with a couple of his retired colleagues, giving the group a polite nod. Within a few months, he became one of their own, the youngest widower of the pack.

Each walker brought a Walkman, but they also discussed life's wonders and annoyances. They rarely socialized off the track. Still, Herbert served as a pallbearer at a group member's funeral.

Herbert can't recall whether he was on the track during the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks or when news blew in of the financial meltdown.

He does remember wearing out 20 pairs of Reeboks, trading war stories and watching, helplessly, as the group shrank year after year.

These days, he walks with a retired Scott Paper manager and a couple of retired schoolteachers from across the state line.

He lives alone in the home he expected to retire in with Evelyn. A wedding portrait of an angelic brunette cradling a bouquet of lilies hangs in the living room.

Herbert does have a "lady friend" on the Westside, who carries her sneakers in the car but never uses them. On Tuesday nights, they dine on \$5.99 hamburgers at Crossroads Restaurant on Kirkwood Highway, griping about the changing demographics of South Philadelphia.

To date, Langerman estimates he has walked 8,000 more miles – another third of the way around the world.

He guesses it will take 12 more years to walk twice around. He isn't optimistic.

Meyer isn't ruling it out. If Langerman doubles his record, he says, "we may consider it."