

# 'I'm exhausted'

## A man who walked across Cyprus so our children can all breathe easier

By Alexia Saoulli

AN EXHAUSTED but clearly elated John Michael Mouskos yesterday ended his 600-kilometre charity walk across the Troodos mountain range, two days earlier than planned.

The 40-year-old London Cypriot was met outside Limassol municipality shortly after 11am, where he was greeted by Limassol mayor Demetris Kontides and handed a plaque as well as a bunch of red roses after his remarkable 21-day walk. His mother and aunt were also among the people cheering him home.

Mouskos, looking very tanned and tired, could not hide his grin from photographers as he took the final steps towards the town hall, carrying no more than a black rucksack on his back. A worn map also poked out of his khaki trousers and his hiking boots looked broken in. Wearing a Breathing Life Trust T-shirt, his first words were: "I am emotionally and physically exhausted. This was a difficult walk, but the pain and fear I felt is nothing like a child with lung problems. I kept that thought in my head and in my soul throughout the walk."

Mouskos' hike was part of a charity campaign to raise awareness for the establish-

ment of a state-of-the-art Lung Centre for children at Nicosia's Makarios Hospital, which he hopes will be up and running by the end of next year.

The Breathing Life Trust was formed in London last month by Mouskos to provide personal and financial support to help children with respiratory and breathing difficulties. This is because although "I live in London, my soul is in Cyprus. This (campaign) is for my love for Cyprus and for the children".

According to Makarios hospital's pulmonologist Dr Panayiotis Yiallourous, respiratory diseases are responsible for the largest part of sickness and mortality in childhood, equalling the severity of cardiovascular diseases in adults.

As part of its first campaign, the Trust has undertaken raising money to set up the local Lung Centre. The funding for such a project is estimated at £200,000, of which £56,000 has already been raised. The remaining amount will be raised by events both in London and in Cyprus, which "I am confident we will achieve," said Mouskos.

Mouskos said the establishment of a lung centre at Makarios hospital will make a great difference to the quality of children's lives throughout the island as it would be operate as a fully-equipped



state-of-the-art respiratory research and treatment centre.

The Breathing Life Trust also intends to provide lung function equipment to all district hospitals on the island and fund several research projects into child respiratory illness.

The 600 km walk, which started in Limassol on May 1, was the focal point of the fund raising campaign. During the walk Mouskos over-nighted in Tochni, Pano Lefkara, Lythrodonda, Machairas Monastery, Askas, Agros, Spilla, Kakopetria, Lemithou, Mylikouri, Stavros Tis Psokas, Polis Chrysochous, Droushia, Paphos and Pissouri.

Mouskos told the *Cyprus Mail* he had completed this walk two days ahead of schedule because he "felt inspired".

Although he had two scheduled rests programmed, he opted to press ahead.

"I wanted the message sent out and felt the sooner it happened the better. I also think this is a message to the Health Minister that it is vital that she opens her eyes and realises the importance of creating this lung centre," he said.

Mouskos, who is an archi-

tect by training, but also a published poet and filmmaker, walked an average of 10 hours a day and at one point covered a maximum of 55 kilometres in a single day. According to his recordings he covered a total ascent of 24,500 feet and 22,000 feet of descent.

In his rucksack he carried two icons, a Cyprus flag with messages written on it from people he met along the way, a camera, several T-shirts, a tape recorder, notepad, compass, maps of Cyprus and several bottles of water. On two nights he camped out under the stars and other days he was put up in people's homes along the way.

He said: "In many ways this was a journey of discovery. A journey, which captured a moment in time, including the changing mood in Cyprus as we joined the EU. I filmed it all and wrote some poetry. I had wonderful thoughts and have recorded beautiful images of Cyprus, which I believe will be used to produce a film."

Mouskos said there were special and dangerous moments during his time in the mountains. Just outside Machairas, for instance, as he was looking down at his shadow, he suddenly saw the ground all around him covered in shadow.

"I knew it was a clear day and so looked up to see a huge cloud of bees flying above me.

Suddenly they dived down and were all around me, thousands of them. And yet, not one stung me. I'm not deeply religious, but this experience and that of the whole walk reinforced and deepened my faith," he said.

Mouskos said he had never fully realised how beautiful the landscape was and the variety of landscape that existed across Cyprus. He said: "The aromas I smelled and the colours I saw awakened all the senses. As I walked into the outer boundaries of Limassol and smelled the different air and felt the different pace; I realised I really miss the mountains."

Although Mouskos walked the majority of the route alone, he stressed the awareness campaign was a team effort and a lot of people had contributed to making it happen.

Asthma is the most frequent chronic disease among Cypriot children and appears to be taking on epidemic proportions. Its frequency was recently found to affect eight to 11 per cent of the total number of school age children in the Nicosia district and six per cent in Limassol. In addition, it appears that one out of every five pre-school age children report at least one or more episodes of bronchospasm and wheezing before the age of six, said Yiallourous.