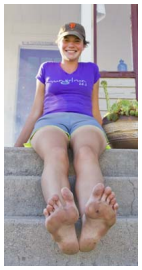

Coast-to-coast barefoot journey raises money for shoes

Step-by-step, 18-year-old Rae Heim is running from one side of the country to the other.

Barefoot.

It’s a goal she set her mind on before her January graduation from high school in Carroll, IA.

Once completed, Heim will be the youngest person to run from coast to coast.

Barefoot.

“I knew I wanted to take a year off before college,” the spunky teen says. “And I knew I wanted to have some kind of fun adventure.”

After meeting a fellow marathon competitor who had run across the country, Heim made it her goal to see the U.S. up close and personal.

Barefoot.

She left from the Atlantic Ocean on April 1, pushing a three-wheeled jogging stroller that held her belongings.

Barring any catastophies, she'll be standing in the Pacific Ocean in mid-November.

Barefoot.

At age 15, Heim entered a 7-mile race just hours before it began. She had previously loathed running but was drawn to it during that race.

Five half-marathons and two full marathons later, running is her passion.

Just over a year ago, Hiem suffered a badly broken toe that resulted in her big toenail being removed.

With a marathon race not far off, she wasn't willing to quit training.

So she kicked off her shoes.

"It was uncomfortable for me to wear shoes so that was kind of my transition," she says.

Barefoot.

Running 20 miles or more a day, Hiem was about halfway to her desination last week when she stopped for the night in Brady.

She showered, took a nap, ate supper and “hung out” with the Litzenberger family the night of July 31before taking off again for North Platte Wednesday morning.

Barefoot.

“The best part about the whole thing is the people I meet,” Heim says. “Everyone has been really nice and I couldn’t ask for better people to stay with.”

Besides the blisters, only the drivers in New Jersey and Iowa have been a pain, many not giving her room to run on the side of the highway.

Since she left Iowa in mid-July, Heim has been running on Highway 30.

Barefoot.

A short time before Heim was ready to embark on her cross country adventure, she decided she could put her bare feet to work for others.

She partnered with a Nashville-based charity called Soles4Souls, which provides shoes to people in need.

Since 2005, Soles4Souls has distributed more than 17 million pairs of shoes in over 127 countries including Kenya, Thailand, Nepal and the United States.

“Although I am a barefoot runner, I know shoes are important to people’s lives,” Heim says. “After running a 26.2-mile marathon barefoot, it was very apparent how well off the majority of

us are."

Every dollar Heim raises puts shoes on one child's feet. A $5 donation provides shoes for an entire family.

At least once a day, Heim says she questions her sanity.

"I ask myself, "Why am I doing this?' I guess the 5,600 pairs of shoes I've raised money for so far is the answer."

Once her goal to reach the West Coast is achieved, Heim says she'll turn her sights toward her next step.

"I think it would be really cool to go to Haiti for a shoe distribution," she says. "Raising money for this cause is one thing. Actually being there to hand a child a pair of shoes is another."

But first, the goal-minded teen has to complete the next step.

Today, she'll be running 20.8 miles from Ogallala to Big Springs.

Barefoot.