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**HeartSmart Walk leader retires after almost 20 years leading walks**

A volunteer walk leader with Chichester District Council’s popular Heart Smart Walk programme is retiring after 20 years.

Dominic Carlton has clocked up over 3,500 miles over the past 20 years, leading an average of three to four walks a month.

Dominic, 86, will be taking part in his last official walk on Wednesday 31 July. This will be a special walk organised to help mark the national ‘Love Parks Week’ campaign. The route will start in front of The Guildhall in Priory Park, Chichester. Fellow walk leader Bruce will take the group around the city walls.

The HeartSmart Walks programme started in 2001, with Dominic joining the programme as a walk leader in 2005.

Having lived his early life in the New Forest, Dominic has always been keen on keeping fit and enjoying the great outdoors. His passion for nature led to his last working role at West Sussex County Council where he was responsible for the rights of way across the entire county.

However, Dominic is vision impaired and can no longer go out as often as he used to. So, he has decided that now is the right time to step down from his walk leader role.

“I’ve always enjoyed the outdoors, even as a young boy growing up during the second world war I spent a lot of time living and enjoying being outside, always going for walks”, says Dominic. “At boarding school, I often did cross country, and even open water swimming, so enjoying exercise has always been part of who I am. Even now I go to Westgate Leisure Centre at least once a week to use the gym.

“With my role at West Sussex County Council, I came to be very familiar with a lot of the county. I even looked after the South Downs Way before the National Park was formed,” explains Dominic.

“After I retired from work, unfortunately I suffered a heart attack one morning in the gym. And once I was better it was suggested to me that the Heart Smart Walks programme would be a good way to still do exercise and enjoy the outdoors, but at a slower pace.

“It was also a lovely opportunity to socialise and meet new people, and I think that’s what people enjoy most about the walks. They get to see the beautiful landscape of the district, at a nice pace and with the chance of meeting new people. It’s a great way to connect with others, I’ve even been on a couple of walks separate to the programme with some of the more regular walkers I’ve met over the years. It’s a lovely way to bond.”

Dominic continues: “Being so familiar with the county and many of the walking routes, it was like a perfect fit for me to start leading walks on the programme. I also believe that to lead well on a project you must be knowledgeable about it. For me that included what types of trees were along the route, and even what different types of flint were around – you never know what the walkers will be interested in while you’re out.”

Having led around 50 walks per year, Dominic has seen a lot of the district and there were one or two routes that he particularly enjoyed: “Although I enjoyed each and every walk, the routes around Thorney Island and Chidham peninsula were always very nice to do. I reckon I must have done the Thorney Island route at least six times over the past few years. It’s such a lovely area being so close to the sea and the Chichester Harbour; there is such a fascinating mix of wonderful wildlife around there.”

During his time leading the walks, Dominic found that there was always an element of preparing for the unexpected: “A big part of leading the walks is making sure everyone stays safe. As we go out in one big group we do tend to stick together, but as we go on others do slow down a little, so we have to look out for ourselves and others.

“There was one time on a walk a couple of years ago that we heard someone crying out, and it turned out that someone on a horse had tried to take a short cut but had instead ended up in a ditch in waist-high water,” recalls Dominic.

“The horse was okay and got out on its own, but we waded in to help the person out. The next day I took my clothes to the laundrette and the laundrette owner said to me “I heard you got my daughter’s friend out of a ditch?” It really is a small world sometimes!”

During his retirement, Dominic will still be keeping as active as he can and is aiming to come along occasionally on the HeartSmart Walks. “I will be keeping up with the gym twice a week, but I will also be very busy looking after the garden, we have half an acre so there is a lot to cover!” says Dominic.

Councillor Tracie Bangert, Cabinet Member for Community and Wellbeing at Chichester District Council, explains: “The HeartSmart walks are very popular among residents, and Dominic has been such a fantastic leader for the programme. We will miss him and his wealth of knowledge, he has been such a star. We always want to encourage even more people to make the most of an activity that’s so good for their heart, health, and state of mind and Dominic and the other leaders have been great champions for this. The walks are a lovely way for residents to meet new people and tackle loneliness, which brings further benefits to people’s wellbeing.”

Chichester Wellbeing are always looking for new volunteer walk leaders, to find out more about training as one, people can contact our Wellbeing Team on **01243 521041** or email **wellbeing@chichester.gov.uk**

For a copy of the latest HeartSmart walks programme people can go to: [**www.chichester.gov.uk/heartsmart**](http://www.chichester.gov.uk/heartsmart)

The walk on Wednesday 31 July from Priory Park, Chichester is available to book on to at: [**www.chichester.gov.uk/article/34166/Book-a-HeartSmart-walk**](http://www.chichester.gov.uk/article/34166/Book-a-HeartSmart-walk)

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