

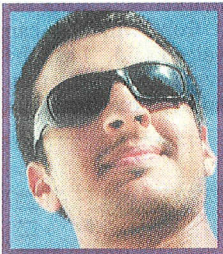
# Focus Today

## I've walked a long way, but my mission is complete...

### UNSUNG HEROES

UPDATE

By David Tusing



**Name:** Jalal bin Thaneya

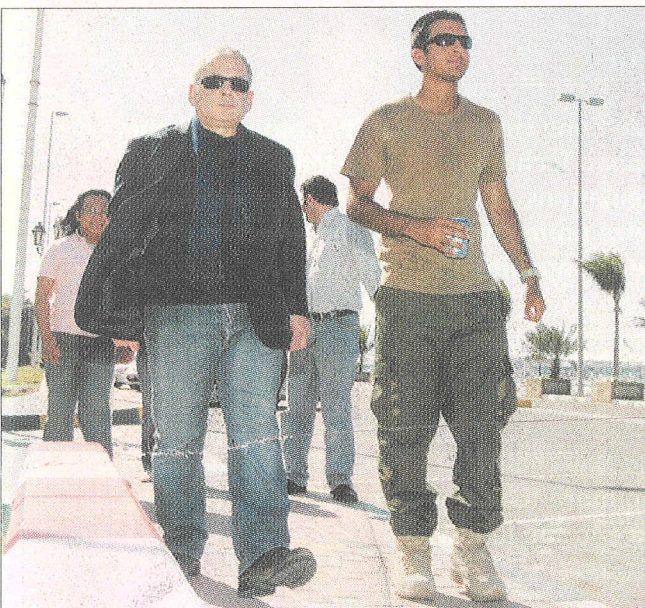
**Age:** 20

**Profile:** This Emirati student set out to walk across the UAE to raise money for charity earlier this month. Twenty-three days later, he arrived in Abu Dhabi after successfully completing his mission. Despite a lukewarm reception, the walker is unfazed and is already setting his sights on his next challenge.

### READERS' NOMINATIONS

DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO IS AN UNSUNG HERO?

Call us or e-mail your nominations to [focus@emiratestodayonline.com](mailto:focus@emiratestodayonline.com)



Jalal was joined by Ahmed Kianin, COO of sponsor Etic

SAEED DAHLAH



Supporters mark the end of Jalal's 600km hike across the UAE

SAEED DAHLAH

**O**n Friday, at about 3pm, a 20-year-old Emirati created history. After trudging 600km for 23 days, Jalal bin Thaneya finally touched the flagstaff on Abu Dhabi's corniche.

In doing so, he became the first national to successfully complete a trek across the UAE. "I've walked a long way. I've completed my mission" said a calm, composed Jalal.

On a lonely stretch of road in Sweihan in Abu Dhabi, Jalal's journey began without a big fanfare on January 3.

The determined business student, who took on the mission to raise awareness for the Dubai Autism Center, says he started with an open mind – and a lot of determination.

"I knew it was not going to be easy," he says. "But it was something I wanted to do felt strongly about."

#### HARSH CONDITIONS

From the unpredictable January weather, muddy roads and rocky terrain to unfriendly locals and even a pack of wild dogs, Jalal endured it all. For his food, sanitary and shelter, a support van provided by his sponsor followed him through the marathon journey.

When he started, the solitary trekker had to fight fatigue and exhaustion as his body struggled to cope with the grind. "Sometimes my muscles give in. Then it depresses me because I want to go the extra kilometre," Jalal said during his journey.

"It is a battle within myself, because I come from the city."

But on Friday, with the sun beating down his back, the walker limped into the capital's corniche, where the UAE Union Flag stands, to be greeted by cheers from his family and loyal supporters.

His father, Jamal bin Thaneya, was there to welcome him. "It's a proud day

for me," said the CEO of ports authority DP World.

"I called him a day before and told him he had become a national hero. We are very happy and very excited," he continued. "This is the day we have to celebrate."

Ahmed Kianin said he had a lump in his throat when he saw Jalal walking towards the flag. "I never doubted he could do it," said the chief operations officer of Emirates Technical Innovation Centre (Etic), Jalal's sponsors. "But it's a great feeling. We are very proud of him."

According to Kianin, Jalal approached several organisations before he set out on his mission. "A lot of them laughed in his face," he says. "One would have thought that many people would willingly support him."

The finale of the three-week walk did not end with a bang. Save for a few of the staff from Etic and family members, Jalal's historic walk ended on a rather subdued note.

"It's surprising none of my friends are here," he said, disappointedly.

"It being a Friday, I would have thought many of them would come to encourage me. If you did something no one has done before, you'd be a bit disappointed too."

Jalal, however, has taken it all in his stride: "The journey has taught me many things I wouldn't have learnt otherwise. I've become more patient and learnt to appreciate other things in life."

"The way I see things have changed and so has the way I speak to people."

"On the road, I had to wake up, clean myself... there is a lot of patience and discipline involved in even that," he adds. "Sometimes I had to walk three kilometres to the nearest bathroom."

The college student says his journey is also symbolic of the



Proud father Jamal bin Thaneya greets his son in Abu Dhabi

SAEED DAHLAH

long journeys his forefathers used to make while traversing the deserts. But rather than the camels and palm trees of past generations, he trod across tarmac in a nation of skyscrapers and automobiles.

Jalal, who lost five kilograms in weight, will soon return to classes at his college in Dubai.

This is the third time he has featured as an Unsung Hero in *Emirates Today*, following far-reaching interest in his journey across the UAE.

Staff members at Dubai Autism Center have also registered an increased number of calls and inquiries about the centre and Jalal.

According to Mohammad Al Emadi, the director general of Dubai Autism Center, Jalal has successfully helped to raise the profile of autism.

"On behalf of all the children and their families at the Dubai Autism Center, we want Jalal to know that we are delighted he has taken such a big step," he says.

"Through his mission, and as a national, he has directed

the attention of decision-makers and private organisations to an internationally widespread problem."

His father, Jamal, says: "He has achieved something he was dreaming of."

#### NEXT STEPS

Meanwhile, back at home, Jalal is thinking about his next mission: "Maybe it will be climbing the highest peak in the GCC next, or a mountain with no roads. But it will be something no UAE national has done before."

Despite the lukewarm support he has received from friends and the hardship he endured along the way, Jalal says he wishes many of his compatriots would learn something from his mission.

"Many of us go through our lives with no sense of achievement and no sense of loss," he says.

"I wish more nationals would take the initiative to struggle a little bit, to go out of their way a little bit and open their minds a little bit."

#### THANK YOU, EMIRATES TODAY

Jalal's endeavour to walk across the UAE has been covered extensively in *Emirates Today*. The 20-year-old student thanked the paper for keeping his marathon journey in the public eye.

"*Emirates Today* understood the importance of my mission and has supported me throughout," he says.

Jalal has been featured as an Unsung Hero on three occasions, due to the widespread public interest in his arduous journey.

"The paper has sparked off the awareness," says Jalal's dad, Jamal bin Thaneya, the CEO of ports authority DP World.

Mohammad Al Emadi, director general of Dubai Autism Center, believes *Emirates Today's* continued coverage of Jalal's progress reflected the paper's role in raising important social issues.

"Many people have called up saying they heard about Jalal through *Emirates Today*," he says. "I wish the other publications had more initiative like *Emirates Today*," says Jalal. "Others put me in the back pages while *Emirates Today* covered the whole story and was enthusiastic about what I was doing. "This is not for self-promotion," he adds. "It's for a worthy cause."



Officials have thanked Emirates Today for its support of Jalal

DAVID TUSING