

People Walker began as a jokey idea but quickly found takers in LA

BEN HOYLE in The Times 4 June 2019

It's 7am in Hollywood and a large man with a beard and long hair is waiting on a corner to discuss loneliness. Chuck McCarthy is dressed for work in a straw boater and a T-shirt that says: "The people walker — never walk alone".

He's hard to miss, which is precisely the point, and we set off on foot for a short loop through the honeysuckle-scented streets.

Three years ago Mc-Carthy, an actor who won't give his age but "plays between 35 and 45", came up with a tongue-in-cheek business idea. Dog-walking apps were taking off but he did not want to work for one because he "didn't want to pick up dog poop".

Instead, he thought, don't people need walking as much as dogs, and not just for exercise?

Los Angeles is home to four million people, many of whom are often stuck in cars, glued to screens or lurching from one temp job to another on different timetables from their friends. Surely some of them would benefit from time outdoors and human company?

Starting with McCarthy. "I was doing a lot of stuff online, writing and making art. Basically being isolated and not talking to anyone. Which is a bad thing, for an actor, to forget how to talk."

So he turned his joke business into a real one. He wore hand-drawn "People Walker" T-shirts and posted flyers asking if there were people who were scared to walk alone at night, embarrassed to walk solo in general or who just "don't like listening to music or podcasts but can't walk alone in silence forced to face thoughts of the unknown future or your own insignificance in the ever expanding universe".

The initial rush of attention was "10,000 times" more intense than expected and he found it stressful at first, but after a year he met a lawyer at a wedding who came on board as his business partner.

Today People Walker has about 10 staff, a small office behind the Hollywood Hills and an Uberstyle app on which people in need of a walk can reach more than 200 freelance companions in the area.

In this neighbourhood, for instance, there's Philip, a film and TV writer who is studying to become a therapist and charges US\$7 (\$10) per half-hour. Or Asteropi, a Greek woman who recently moved from Brazil and loves making nature videos, for double that. Or for \$US21 there's Jack from Delaware, an artist who is "very into fitness and wellness".

McCarthy says he needs 800 more walkers to meet demand in LA. There are outposts in Portland and San Francisco and he is seeking investors to help to scale the business and eventually take it abroad.

There's no one reason why people seek his services. Safety and fitness are the most common reasons they cite, and walking encourages people to unplug and fosters inspiration. "Very few people are going to say, 'Oh, I'm lonely'," McCarthy says. "But everything we do is about loneliness.

"You have a job so you can buy a house, take a shower, buy clothing because you know people don't want to be around a guy who smells bad and is wearing rags."

People Walker just addresses that need more directly. The people he walks don't look obviously lonely. "They're married or have plenty of friends and family around. But here, and in lots of parts of the world, to just connect for a walk is tough."

We're back at the corner. So how big does he think People Walker can get? "It sounds supersilly and punny," he says, shuffling and smiling awkwardly. "I'm just trying to take it one step at a time."

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