

The Dreamcatcher Expedition

Launching from Lake Itasca on the Canadian border on August 30, 2006, a retired Navy captain and a clinically depressed writer will set out on a two month, 2,350-mile expedition down the length of the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico. Their vessel: an 18-foot We-no'nah Missesota II canoe. Their mascot: Clyde the dog. Their mission, two fold: for one, the fulfillment of a life goal; for the other, the collection of the dreams and wishes of those he meets along the river and the sending out to sea of the lot of them in a message-in-a-bottle gesture of hope for humankind.

For Captain Frank Grandau, canoeing the Mississippi has been on his list of things to do since attending Parks College on the banks of the river in Cohokia, IL. "It's probably been more of a goal than a dream for me. I think I'm too much of a pragmatist to dream much anymore."

For writer Rick McKinney, author of the recently published "Dead Men Hike No Trails," it is his third major physical expedition in three years to battle his own suicidal depression and give hope to the other 1 in 4 Americans who suffer some form of mental illness.

"I feel like I've been clinging to life by my fingernails all summer waiting for this journey," McKinney said. "I'll be damned if I not only complete the trip but shed a ray of hope for other depression-sufferers in the doing."

Why McKinney feels he's clinging to life by his fingernails requires a little history.

Grandau and McKinney met while each was on his own solo thruhike of the 2,174-mile Appalachian Trail in 2004. For the mentally healthy Grandau, conquering the AT was a post-retirement goal. For the mentally ill McKinney, it was a fight to stay alive. "In one of those no-one-saw-it-coming cases, a young friend of mine had just shot himself," McKinney said. "After years of severe depression and a stint in a psychiatric hospital for attempted suicide, I thought, well, that's it. I'm next."

Then McKinney found and read a book about another man's life-altering odyssey on the AT. Within weeks, the 37-year old McKinney hit the trail in Georgia a self-described "mental and physical basket case." Six months later he summited the trail's final peak, Mt. Katahdin, "a machine with calves of iron - my suicidal thoughts, gone."

McKinney didn't stop there. Over the ensuing year, he wrote and published a 400-page tome chronicling his physical journey and its mentally healing aspects.

While McKinney was penning the pages that would become "Dead Men," his mentor, the celebrated author Hunter S. Thompson, shot himself at his home in Colorado.

With mental stamina left over from his two thousand plus-mile hike, McKinney put down his pen and mapped out a 500-mile hike from Yellowstone National Park to the front gate

of Thompson's renowned Owl Farm home. His goal: to raise public awareness of the epidemic of suicide in America with Thompson's death as his means of being heard.

McKinney kept quiet about an ankle badly sprained in his first days out and painfully reached Thompson's home some 50 days later in time for the deceased's August 20 memorial. With one major radio interview and mention in half a dozen newspapers en route, McKinney counted his efforts a success and returned to his native Arizona to finish his book.

Fate allowed McKinney two weeks to celebrate the publication of his first major literary endeavor before death intervened again. In what he termed "a horrific loss and a cruelly ironic twist of fate," a young woman with whom the author had recently become romantically involved took her own life in late January. Blind with grief, McKinney did the one thing he now knew how to do to cope: he went hiking.

"I hiked and hacked my way through the jungles of Copper Canyon, Mexico with inadequate maps, running out of water, running into marijuana growers, subconsciously daring them to shoot me, fearless. I was a walking stifled scream." (McKinney admits that when he was sure he was alone he did scream and shed plenty a tear for his friend.)

Half a year later, still plagued by suicidal thoughts and "nail-you-to-the-floor" bouts of depression, McKinney wishes he'd "stayed in Mexico longer, screamed louder, cried a river." But he knows his friend's death is not what ails him still.

"It's depression, pure and simple. It's a disease like my father's diabetes. If he doesn't take his medicine, he's flirting with death. I take my medications, but I don't think they're working anymore. I've been on death's door all summer, faking it, winging it, smiling through a heinous internal struggle."

McKinney admits to probably having cried a river this summer. But on August 30th, the tears stop and the hard work of paddling and navigating the biggest river in North America begin.

The canoe, the equipment, the trip's initial concept and planning: all Frank Grandau. McKinney's lone task: show up. But as those who have been there can attest, when you're depressed, showing up is oftentimes the hardest thing.

However, three's a charm.

And McKinney says he's up to the task, his third "annual" monster trek for mental health. "Every day closer to the launch is one step further from checking into a mental hospital. I just keep reminding myself to hold on, you can make it. You've got to do this. You've got to show others that there's hope."

McKinney says the idea to collect the dreams of others "on scraps of paper, bar napkins, whatever," and stuff them in a corked bottle bound for the gulf came to him during the

hardest part of this long summer, a summer in which he saw his own dream of touring with his new book quietly suffocate under the weight of his depression.

"This is a chance to get out of my own head and maybe help others, to gather the best and highest hopes of people along the river and lend them a magic nudge toward future fruition."

With the help of friends and an old pda and collapsible keyboard, McKinney will be posting his journal to his website from the river on Jigglebox.com.

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