

PADDLING FOR PARKINSON'S



Joe Forrester sets out Tuesday morning on his four month, 3,900-mile journey paddling from Headwaters State Park near Three Forks to the Gulf of Mexico to raise awareness of Parkinson's disease.

Medical student to paddle from Three Forks to Gulf of Mexico to raise money, awareness in fight against Parkinson's disease

With gray clouds hanging overhead and high water rushing by, 24-year-old Joe Forrester sealed his 17-foot kayak before putting in at the Missouri River, embarking on a four-month voyage to raise money to fight Parkinson's disease.

Forrester, whose grandfather was diagnosed with the illness in 2005, aims to raise \$20,000 for the National Parkinson's Foundation by navigating 3,900 river miles to the Gulf of Mexico.

"Alright, let's do this," he said, dipping his yellow-tipped paddle into the brown water as his father, Joe Forrester II stood by at Missouri Headwaters State Park in Three Forks.

After watching treatment help ease his grandfather's tremors and improve coordination, the fourth-year medical student decided last March to plan the mammoth journey, already raising \$12,000 toward his goal.

"I figured it would be really nice to show support for

him," he said. "It certainly means a lot to him and a lot to our family as well."

But he's had his hands full.

"Organizing a trip like this on top of going to medical school full time is a big commitment," said Forrester, who grew up in Colorado.

Even so, the effort is largely a family affair. His father and grandfather will be there at the end of the trip in New Orleans. And Forrester's grandparents named his kayak "Mary Agnes," after their mothers.

Along the way, he'll meet with folks, many of them from Parkinson's support groups, who will help him refresh supplies. One man with Parkinson's also offered to paddle for a stretch of the trip.

He's bringing a satellite phone and a cell phone, but acknowledges he'll likely be talking to himself after spending weeks alone on the river.

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"It happens, it starts to happen pretty quick," Forrester said.

His father worries a bit about challenges Forrester will face along the way. But he's also accustomed to his son's adventurous side. In the past several years there have been a couple of scares, like the time Forrester's dad got a call from an Argentinean intensive care unit after his son received a head injury and broke a vertebra in a

rockslide while scaling a South American mountain.

"You're just nervous about the unexpected things," his dad said. "We've had some interesting moments."

And there are many variables like tornados, hail, lightening and — once he hits the Mississippi — barge traffic, said Norm Miller, who's paddled much of the same stretch Forrester will navigate.

"The weather is going to be the biggest factor," Miller said.

But Forrester, who has navigated river journeys in the past, is accustomed to challenges. After this trip, he's going to Africa on another climbing expedition before heading back to school, co-enrolling at the University of London earning a master's of science and infectious disease while finishing his medical degree at the

University of Virginia.

And the omens on Tuesday looked right, Miller said as a bald eagle flew over the rushing river below.

"That's a good sign," he said. "Yeah, he's going to cruise on this."

People can donate or track his location online at: www.paddlingforparinsons.com.

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