

Canadian paddling 3,000 miles to honor his uncle

• Trip to raise awareness for heart disease

JESSICA GIARD/SUN

Dominique Liboiron wants you to know about heart disease.

The Saskatchewan native wants people to become more active, eat healthier and stop smoking so they can avoid the disease that caused his uncle's death at 42 years old.

And, to get your attention, Liboiron is doing what has apparently never been done before. He is canoeing from Saskatchewan to New Orleans, a 3,000-mile voyage along the Frenchman, Milk, Missouri and Mississippi rivers.

"Doing something that catches people's attention helps me get my message out there. That's why it's 'canoe to New Orleans' and not 'drive a Chevy half-ton to New Orleans.' That's been done before," said Liboiron.

His uncle Mitch Hamon, given the title of M'Nonc Mitch – which means 'uncle' in French – died from a massive heart attack on Nov. 21, 2010. As Liboiron explains, his uncle had a

deep appreciation for New Orleans and the Cajun lifestyle, a love which intensified after his uncle's trip to Louisiana in 1992 and continued through his death.

"My uncle Mitch was amazing," he said. "Life was always better when my uncle was around. He had a way of making people feel special. I really miss him."

Liboiron started planning the trip to honor his uncle and raise awareness for heart disease in January 2012. However, years ago, while in high school, he realized he could reach the Missouri River from Canada by connecting the Frenchman and Milk rivers. The Milk River meets the Missouri downstream of Fort Peck on Lake Sakakawea in eastern Montana.

Liboiron set off from Eastend, Sask., on June 8. He arrived in Chamberlain on Friday, Sept. 21 and spent the weekend resting, resupplying and catching up on his work as a freelance journalist before returning to the river on Monday.

He's completed over

1,300 miles, now over a third done. He expects to reach New Orleans in December, and, by the end of October should meet the Mississippi River in St. Louis.

"I don't see it as one big trip. I see it as, I wake up in the morning and canoe to my campsite," Liboiron said. "I try to break it down into small manageable bits and then when I put them all together, it will get me to New Orleans."

He's paddled nearly 500 miles now on the Missouri River reservoirs, which can be a slow process for a paddler when faced with slow current, wind and the waves that come with it. He's found, too, that each lake – Sakakawea, Oahe and Sharpe, so far – have distinct features and, in a sense, personalities.

"What I really liked about (Lake Sharpe) ... a lot of it is cliff face. You can always hide from the wind in there," he said. "You don't have that on Oahe. The shore is very gradual and the wind just comes racing down the hills. There's really nowhere to



Jessica Giard/Sun

Dominique Liboiron and his loaded Clipper canoe head out from Chamberlain on Monday, Sept. 24 on the way to New Orleans from Canada via the Frenchman, Milk, Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. The journey is to raise awareness of heart disease and honor his uncle Mitch, who deeply appreciated the Cajun lifestyle of New Orleans.

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Now on Lake Francis Case for the next 80-some river miles, Liboiron said he'll take more time to enjoy the river.

"When I was on Sakakawea and Oahe, the idea was to get through it as fast as you can," he said.

But, while on Lake Francis Case, he plans to

do some walleye fishing, a change from his experience fly fishing in the mountains of Canada.

Liboiron says his journey is worth it.

"I feel like it's making a difference as far as raising awareness is concerned. People have sent me messages saying that the trip has encouraged them to

lose weight or get their heart monitored and check their blood pressure," he said. "That's good. That's what it's all about."

Visit the Canoe to New Orleans website at www.canoetoneworleans.com to follow Liboiron's updates.