

Canoe trip a fitting Cajun tribute for a loved one

BY COURTNEY SMITH —
ppost@prairiepost.com

According to Canada's Heart and Stroke Foundation, 90 per cent of Canadians have at least one risk factor for heart disease or stroke, including smoking, alcohol, physical inactivity, or high blood pressure.

Heart disease continues to be a problem in society — a problem that could be fixed with simple life changes in healthy eating and exercise.

One Medicine Hat man is determined to encourage society to change their lifestyle and make healthier choices. One man is going to canoe 5,000 kilometres from Saskatchewan, through 13 American states, along four major rivers to proclaim his message.

One man will face whirlpools, wildlife, and physical exhaustion in an attempt to save the lives of others.

That man is Dominique Liboiron.

On June 8, Liboiron will canoe for four to five months in order to raise awareness of heart disease.

Liboiron's Uncle Mitch died in 2010 from a heart attack and Liboiron doesn't want anyone else to lose a loved one due to an unhealthy lifestyle.

"My goal isn't to raise money, it's to promote awareness," states the determined canoer. "The difference being, that people know what they need to do to have a healthy heart, it's just about getting people to take it seriously. It's so much easier for people to say they don't have to worry about it, but once you start adding risk factors like drinking, smoking, it all starts to add up. That's the thing we saw with my uncle. He was an amazing person. Everyone called him Uncle Mitch, even people who

weren't related to him, but his lifestyle was very hard on his body, and it catches up with you. You don't realize you might be setting a pattern that by age 42, you have a heart attack because your body just can't live that way. So that's the message, that's the difference. I don't think the cause needs more money, I think it needs more awareness."

Despite Uncle Mitch's hard lifestyle of alcohol, smoking, drugs, and lack of exercise, he possessed charismatic, sincere qualities that drew people into him. Liboiron speaks of his Uncle making homemade waffles every Saturday and sharing them with a different neighbour each time. Uncle Mitch thrived on making the lives of people around him better with letters, gifts, or just telling them they were great for being themselves. Liboiron has felt the pain and hurt of losing a loved one, and wants to reach out to society in hopes of preventing it within other families and friendships.

"He was such a huge part of my life," reminisces Liboiron. "He was my uncle, but he was more of a big brother. When people would talk to him, they would just light up. When he died, it was like losing a best friend. I wondered what I would do with the hurt and the pain, but you have to do something good with it; you can't turn it into something bad. It was a bad thing, but it didn't need to be made worse. This will hopefully promote health and help people look at their own lifestyle choices and realize they need to make a change or to encourage loved ones to be a bit more careful."

With a challenging journey ahead of him, Liboiron is continually preparing himself emotionally and physically. He works out three to four times a week



Medicine Hat's Dominique Liboiron will canoe for four to five months in order to raise awareness of heart disease.

Photo by Courtney Smith

at Badlands Cross Fit, and plays floor hockey once a week in Maple Creek. He has dedicated his life to healthy living and hopes for others to practice the same.

"Healthy living is something I've been into for quite a while," comments Liboiron. "People say, 'but the food is terrible, all the best food is unhealthy.' And it's true, bacon is amazing, but so are garden fresh strawberries and vegetables."

To conquer the fears of water and wilderness, Liboiron has made a board of inspiration, jotting down the positives and negatives of the canoe trip. To combat the fears of the negatives, he devised a fix to every problem, realizing that he was capable of anything he set his mind to.

His motto: I will succeed.

"You need to keep all your ideas organized," advises Liboiron. "You need to make a list of reasons to go and reasons not to go. My number one fear was drowning, so then I started thinking of ways to solve that problem: you get a life jacket. Once I did that, it wasn't a big deal anymore. I had all these solutions to these problems. The reasons to go far outweigh the fears. I'm sure there's going to be fear and worry, but once I get through them it's like, 'thank God I didn't stay home and watch wheel of fortune.' Bottom line, I will succeed."

Liboiron chose to end his canoe trip in New Orleans, Louisiana because his Uncle Mitch loved the food, people, and music of the area. He will take his Uncle's ashes to a cemetery in New Orleans to honour his memory.

Subsequent to Liboiron's trip, he wishes to write a novel about his experience and the ways in which Uncle Mitch's death has affected him and changed his life forever.

He and his cousin, Tanya also plan to create a cookbook of recipes people can make outdoors, for those who like to camp or embark on wilderness adventures.

Liboiron's story, courage, and determination is inspiring. His hopes to create awareness and combat heart disease to save lives will most definitely make a difference in society.

"Alcoholism, drug addiction, depression, and abuse all thrive on silence," adds Liboiron. "That's where they get their strength, and I consider them all to be forces of darkness. The only way to beat darkness is with light. You can't fight darkness with darkness, but talking about them and exposing them is my way to encourage people to get help with those problems if they need it."

For more information on Dominique Liboiron's incredible story and canoe journey, visit his website at: www.canoetoneworleans.com.

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