

Special delivery ... to space

A postal carrier will pedal across the U.S. to inspire messages of hope for NASA to carry to the cosmos.

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The pedaling postman is off again on his appointed rounds. This time his route is the United States, and the destination for the mail upon completion of his greatest adventure will be nothing less than the heavens above.

St. Paul's Gary Fitch will take to his two-wheeler the day after Memorial Day, beginning a cross-country ride on May 29 that will take him from Seattle to Washington, D.C., inspiring and collecting letters as he goes. Sometime after the completion of his trip, scheduled for Aug. 11, he hopes to have NASA fire the substance of all that mail off into outer space.

And what will those letters say? They will be messages of hope, of appeal, of supplication, the collected pleas of a nation simply for a better tomorrow.

"My hope, for instance," Gary says, "is that the adults of this world will somehow keep the thing together long enough for the kids to grow up and teach us how to behave."

A very basic and simple dream, but do not cut Gary Fitch short. I first met this energetic East Sider almost 21 years ago when he stopped by to talk about the bike trip he was making to Duluth to raise funds for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. He wound up delivering his mail to the White House, to be hand-carried personally to President Bush the First.

He's been riding for charitable causes for more than 30 years, first in remembrance of a young cousin who died of leukemia, and then to raise money for St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn., for cystic fibrosis research, among other causes.

And the man doesn't even like to bike.

"I don't bike unless it's for a ride like this," Gary says. "I'm a walker. I walk around Como Lake every day on my job."

Gary, 55, is a letter carrier for the U.S. Postal Service by day. In a few weeks, he'll represent all the other letter carriers in the country - and there are 225,000 of them - in his mission to share America's collected hopes and dreams with whomever, whatever, might be in outer space.

"I began this 2½ years ago as I watched the waters of that terrible tsunami take the lives and homes of thousands," Gary said. "I just felt I needed to do something myself. I looked to the skies and asked if there was an answer. It's then that I decided that we needed to look beyond ourselves and to the heavens."

So starting on Memorial Day, Gary will begin collecting all the letters and notes that people across the country write about how they feel and their hopes for the world, for delivery to NASA in Washington.

His mission may sound far-fetched, but Gary already has the endorsement and support of the National Association of Letter Carriers, Disabled American Veterans, the Minnesota National Guard, the Minnesota Catholic Conference, the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly and the Muscular Dystrophy Association, among others. He has a resolution of support from the St. Paul City Council.

Gary's journey will take him from Seattle to Spokane, then to Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, across Minnesota from Ortonville to La Crescent, through Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Maryland and to Washington, D.C.

Along the way he'll be encouraging Americans to send "Letters of Hope" via the Postal Service that will wind up first in the dead letter offices in St. Paul and Denver. Gary has been working with NASA's education department, and the plan is to scan all the messages and put the data on discs that will be taken into space on a future flight.

What happens to the messages from there remains a delicious mystery of the cosmos.

Back here on Earth for the next few months, Gary will be riding his bike at least 60 miles a day, and he's counting heavily on the help of friends like Dan Garhofer, president of the St. Paul local of the letter carriers' union.

"We've contacted schools, nursing homes, prisons, the troops serving overseas, and nobody has resisted yet," said Garhofer. "This is not about religion, politics or any hidden motives."

"Just the simple concept of hope."

It is especially not about money, Gary stressed. Gary is not asking for donations. His trip will cost him about \$25,000, and he is getting some help and sponsorship in that. But he will not be collecting money along his journey. Just letters.

His wife, Joan, will be his road manager - "my support, my bodyguard, my blogger, my best friend" - along the way. He hopes his progress will be publicized so people can follow this determined biker.

If you have more questions about Gary's trip, or would like to support him in some way, a Web site has been set up at www.letterofhope2007.com.

"The idea seems a little wacky to some," he said, "but to others it has the appeal and maybe even some of the romance of the old Pony Express.

"I'll be riding up to take the mail and then ride on."

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FYI

Gary Fitch's Web site for trip information is www.letterofhope2007.com.

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