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LIFE CYCLE

FdL native will pedal coast-to-coast for arthritis awareness



Joey Michels was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis when he was 3 years old. The 21-year-old Fond du Lac man hasn't let that slow him down and plans to bike from California to Maine this summer to raise awareness of the disease. (Patrick Flood/The Reporter)

By Monica M. Walk

For The Reporter

Back tire in the Pacific, front tire in the Atlantic: That's Joey Michels' summer motto.

A coast-to-coast cycling adventure requires moxie, stamina and strength. Michels has those traits, but he also has been dealt the wildcard of rheumatoid arthritis, which can lay a body low despite the best-laid plans.

It's that very lifetime of inflamed joints and a feverish Fond du Lac childhood confined to a couch that is pushing the 21-year-old Michels to pedal across the country in a quest to raise awareness of the autoimmune disease along with raising funds for the Arthritis Foundation.

"The Arthritis Foundation changed my life," said Michels, who hopes to raise \$20,000 for the organization during the cycling trip slated for June 1 through Sept. 1.

"The Joints in Motion program makes it possible for people like Joey to raise funds and awareness on behalf of the Arthritis Foundation to fight arthritis, the nation's number one cause of disability," said Hayley Wolf, marketing and communications coordinator for the Upper Midwest

Region of the Arthritis Foundation. "He is helping to improve the quality of life for millions of men, women and children with arthritis."

For a good cause

In the United States, 1 in 5 adults — over 50 million — and more than 300,000 children live with some form of arthritis.

Michels plans to direct the money he raises to research and to Camp M.A.S.H., the Wisconsin Dells-based summer camp where his belief in his abilities blossomed. He described the camp as a place where children with autoimmune disorders can relate to each other and find out what they can do.

Michels discovered he loved adventure. Yet, this kind of physical activity was only a dream for him as a child.

"I had a really bad childhood," he said, referring to his health and the diagnosis of Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis at age 3, which includes intense high fevers and severe joint and muscle pain. "At age 12, I secretly weaned myself off my meds, and I was in remission. The labs were good, so the doctor put me on less harsh meds that I could

HOW TO HELP

To donate to the Arthritis Foundation in recognition of Joey Michel's coast-to-coast biking campaign, go to <http://jointsinmotion2012.kintera.org> and click on the "sponsor participant" link and type in Joseph Michels.

KEEP UP TO DATE

The Fond du Lac cyclists will blog about their adventures in arthritis awareness at <http://raincyclists.blogspot.com>



Cycle

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take as I wanted. That was a turning point: I decided arthritis was not going to affect me."

So, he continued to play soccer despite a doctor's warning to a then 14-year-old Michels that continuing to play would put him in a wheelchair by age 25.

"I wanted to do everything I can," said the 2008 Fond du Lac High School graduate who has worked as a AmeriCorps volunteer in both the National Civilian Community Corps and the Montana Conservation Corps.

New plan

After nine years in remission, a serious arthritis flare rerouted his plans to enroll at the University of Tucson. As he recuperated and his health improved, Michels hatched a new plan — a cross country bike trip.

"I had seen a lot on a road trip, but you can see even more on a bike and why not do it for a cause?" said Michels who credits his mom for instilling the volunteer spirit in him. "I'm following in her footsteps, but making my own path."

His mother, Kate Bauer, worked for a decade for

the American Red Cross in Madison before starting up the first student chapter of Habitat for Humanity at University of Wisconsin-Fond du Lac. The mother of six children credits the Arthritis Foundation for providing support as she struggled to understand and accept her youngest child's illness. She now volunteers her time, talking with parents of children diagnosed with the disease.

"It was an outlet for emotions and questions, and helping others deal with it helps me," said Bauer, adding that daughter, Eshalon, was diagnosed with another form of childhood arthritis at age 13. "Autoimmune disease is in our family, and an environmental trigger like twisting an ankle can turn it on."

On the road

Trip preparation for Michels has included running in Hobb's Woods in combination with cross-training arms and abdominal muscles, plus time on a bike.

Michels plans to follow the Race Across America Route which begins near San Diego until reaching Pennsylvania, at which point he and cycling companions and long-time Fond du Lac friends

Matthew Frintner, Nate Martin and Alex Wright will take a sharp turn north to head through the New England states before finishing their journey in Portland, Maine.

"They've been through this whole thing with me," Michels said, referring to the arthritis. "They are good friends, and the timing is good for all of them."

A three-month odyssey of 4,000 miles means cycling daily for five hours at a rate of 10 m.p.h. Along the way, the quartet will stop for the July 19-22 National Juvenile Arthritis Conference in St. Louis, where Michels expects to speak on panels and talk about the cross-country journey.

"I have bone-on-bone rubbing," Michels said. "I know the day is coming when it will be hard to get up, (that's) what arthritis will do to me. Until that happens I'm going to crunch in everything I want to do because later it will be that much harder. I believe in mind over matter."

Bauer, who will bike alongside her son for two weeks, is proud of Joey.

"He has had a tough road and has come out on top of the hill," she said.