

Billings Gazette

Letter carrier wants 'hopes and dreams' shot into space

By ED KEMMICK
Of The Gazette Staff

When he's working, Gary Fitch walks about six miles a day, delivering the mail. This summer, he's bicycling 2,800 miles, from Seattle to Washington, D.C., encouraging people to write letters.

He's not doing this for job security. He's hoping that millions of Americans will set their hopes and dreams down on paper for eventual delivery into space, "a little closer to God."



He can't guarantee it will do any good, but after years of war, terrorism and natural disasters, he figures it can't hurt. "We're sending the prayers to God," he said. "We've got the technology. Maybe if we send a few million thoughts, something will happen."



Fitch has been working with NASA and hopes to have the letters scanned, transferred to discs and delivered on a space shuttle mission to the international space station.

"And then when the world deserves it, we'll bring them back down and create a permanent memorial to the hopes and dreams of all Americans," Fitch said.

Fitch, 55, left Seattle on May 29 and is planning to arrive in the nation's capital on Aug. 11. He took a few days of rest in Billings, where he arrived Thursday, at the KOA Kampground on Garden Avenue, and planned to resume his journey Sunday. He said he tries to average 40 to 60 miles a day, but occasionally pauses briefly, as he did here.

Fitch is dedicated, but he's not foolhardy. His wife, Joan, accompanies him in a 27-year-old RV. He says he won't ride in the rain - he drove through part of Idaho, where it was raining and 37 degrees - and if the road he's on turns to gravel, he packs his touring bike into the RV and drives to pavement.

He's been enjoying his first trip to Montana. Last Tuesday, he reached a speed of 47 mph on the frontage road alongside the Livingston Pass, and later in the day Chris Benden, a letter carrier in Livingston, took both Fitches sightseeing in Yellowstone National Park. On his blog, Fitch called that the best day of the trip so far.

On Thursday morning, Fitch spent some time at the Boys and Girls Club of Billings and Yellowstone County, where he encouraged children in the summer program to write and mail their own letters of hope.

The letters are being collected in St. Paul, Minn., where Fitch lives, and stored until his return in the local letter carrier union hall. Fitch is on unpaid leave but has received assistance from his local union and from other sponsors.

This is not Fitch's first bicycling project. More than 30 years ago, he biked from Minnesota to Tennessee in remembrance of a cousin who died of leukemia. He rode from Minnesota to Washington, D.C., in 1989 to deliver a letter from a young cancer patient to the first President Bush.

Although people of all ages are encouraged to take part in his latest crusade, Fitch is doing it mainly for young people. "I just want the kids to have something positive in their lives to look at," he said.

For all the idealism he expresses, Fitch doesn't sound or look like a wide-eyed dreamer. He speaks in a gruff voice and he doesn't mince words. And he admits he doesn't really enjoy riding a bicycle.

"If I ever do this kind of thing again," he said, "it'll be on a Harley."

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Published on Monday, June 18, 2007.