

Posted Sunday April 13, 2008

## Binghamton High grad plans daring Atlantic crossing

### 2,950-mile rowboat voyage to benefit cancer research



Justin Desrosiers with Aquidneck Customs, builder of the Liv, takes it out onto the water for its first launch in February from the boat shop in Rhode Island. Paul Ridley, 24, a Binghamton High School graduate, plans to row the 19-foot fiberglass boat across the Atlantic Ocean in hopes of raising \$500,000 for cancer research in honor of his mother, Katherine Ridley, who died from malignant skin cancer.

By Doug Schneider, Press & Sun-Bulletin

BINGHAMTON -- What will you be doing this Christmas season?

Will you host holiday parties for friends? Spend weekdays rushing to finish projects at work, and weekends scurrying to make sure there will be presents beneath a tree? Will you toss a few coins into a kettle at the mall?

Forget that it's only April. Paul Ridley, all of 24 years old, has Christmas mapped out. He plans to spend it alone, save perhaps for the occasional sea turtle. He'll consume 8,000 calories that day, but none will come from turkey, stuffing or cranberries -- unless they're freeze-dried.

He expects no gifts, but he hopes to deliver one very big one.

Ridley, a 2001 Binghamton High School graduate, is determined to do what few humans have done: row across the Atlantic Ocean powered only by his boundless energy and three sets of oars.

His goal: To raise \$500,000 for cancer research. His vessel: A bright yellow, 19-foot rowboat. His place in history: Only about 50 others have accomplished this feat in the past 120 years.

"We truly believe that God has everything provided for," Paul's father, Lutheran pastor Mark

Ridley said from the living room of his Helen Street house. "But that doesn't mean we won't have a funny feeling in our stomachs. This will do wonders for our prayer life."

Sometime in early December, the youngest of Mark and Katherine Raub Ridley's two children plans to climb aboard a \$50,000 foam-core boat and start rowing west from the Canary Islands. If all goes well, he'll make landfall in February at English Harbor, Antigua, 2,950 nautical miles away.

"I finished high school and joined the Marines," said Joe Yanuzzi, a childhood friend of Paul Ridley's, his voice conveying a mixture of respect and disbelief. "But I tell him he's the crazy one."

### **'Row for Hope'**

"For years, I've had this nagging kind of thing that sat unfulfilled in high school and college," Paul Ridley says of an energy he felt during his days at Binghamton High School and later at Colgate University. "I knew early I wanted to do something ... but this isn't the something I knew right away that I was going to do."

Like many, Ridley found the love of his life in college -- only in this case, his love was rowing. But his trans-Atlantic journey began, indirectly, with another sport near a much smaller body of water.

He was a 17-year-old BHS student and a pitcher for the Patriots' baseball team, the product of years of toil at MacArthur Park near the Susquehanna River. His parents had nurtured his baseball dream, but suddenly in 2001, his mom couldn't cheer him on.

First came symptoms, and an illness. Next, a diagnosis: Skin cancer. Too soon thereafter, she passed away. Then, doctors said his dad had prostate cancer. Treatments began.

"Seventeen was a very important time in my life, and the loss of my mom affected me tremendously," Ridley recalls. "I knew I had to do something to honor her memory."

Fast forward several years. With an economics degree, a job at a Greenwich, Conn., management firm, and a love of rowing developed at college, Ridley hatched the idea for what he calls Row for Hope.

The organization -- which includes Ridley's 27-year-old sister, Joy, a fellow rowing aficionado on its six-member board of directors -- was given nonprofit status by the IRS in 2007.

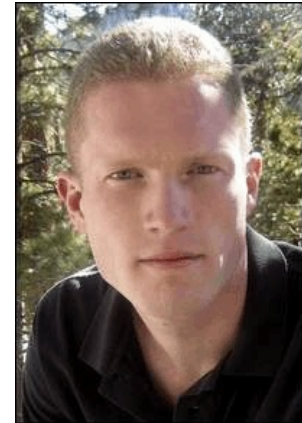
Row For Hope has signed on corporate sponsors, launched a Web site and, perhaps most important, succeeded in getting Ridley several months off from work to train for his journey.

"I heard about this project and immediately said to myself, 'It sounds just like Paul,'" said Patty Gazda-Grace, who taught Ridley in Binghamton High's International Baccalaureate program and was a friend of his mother's. She recalls Paul as an intelligent student who wasn't shy about asking questions.

"He was the kind of kid who convinced you, and everyone else around him, that he could do anything."

"The Row" itself will take two to three months, involve 10 to 12 hours manning the oars each day, and require more than \$50,000 worth of boat and equipment. Most of that expense is Ridley's vessel, the Rhode Island-built Liv, which is Norwegian for "Life."

Battery- and solar-powered global-positioning systems, a PDA and a satellite phone will be



essential in keeping Ridley in daily touch with supporters via voice, e-mail and a Web site.

A desalinization machine aboard Liv will filter the salt from ocean water to make it drinkable.

### **Optimistic view**

Neither electronics nor determination offer perfect protection when the waves can top 30 feet. Solar-powered communication devices offer a small safety net, but might not work after several cloudy days in a row.

In 40 years, 85 rowers have attempted an east-to-west Atlantic crossing similar to the one Ridley plans, according to the Ocean Rowing Society International, which tracks rowing feats for the Guinness Book of World Records.

Forty percent of such attempts failed.

West-to-east trips -- considered more difficult -- have ended tragically. During a 143-day crossing attempt in 2001, retired cardiologist Nenad Belic vanished in a gale. Fishermen found his capsized boat six weeks later, hundreds of miles from its last known position. Belic, who left a wife and four children, has never been found.

Ridley understands the risk in his voyage, but points out that he'll have significant support.

"Yes, I'll be the only one rowing, but there will be another dozen people helping me succeed," he said, his enthusiasm audible over a scratchy phone line. "I couldn't have gotten near the starting line without them."

Of the 50 rowers to complete the east-west crossing, six (of the seven who tried) did so this winter. The fastest of the six needed 67 days. The last American finisher was Richard Jones in 2000-01; only one other American has completed the trip.

"Paul's boat looked a lot bigger at the boat works than when he put it in the water," says Ridley's stepmother, Nadine, who had seen Liv taking shape inside the factory.

Ridley recognizes that he will face danger during his voyage, acknowledging variables ranging from 30-foot seas to the pirates that occasionally operate in the south Atlantic. But he takes an optimistic view.

In the coming months, Ridley's life will be focused on preparing for his voyage.

He's continuing to seek sponsors, including someone to foot the estimated \$15,000 it will take to fly Liv from New England to her departure point. He's helping set up Web pages, including Row for Hope's site, and a page on the social networking site Facebook. The Web sites are designed to promote the cause, and to seek donations.

And he's training -- a 12-workouts-per-week "ocean-specific" training schedule with a coach from the Norwalk (Conn.) River Rowing Association. A Long Island-to-Cape Cod row is planned for four or five days around Memorial Day.

"People might look at this like it's a rowing project," he says. "But it's also been a sales project, and a legal project, and a project to set up the nonprofit."

And, he hopes, the foundation's charitable work will continue -- long after Liv has reached Antigua.

"Row For Hope as an organization will be continuing after my row is over," he said, mentioning the possibility of involving youth rowing clubs in raising cancer-research money. "This is not a one-and-done thing."