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Fundraising's long, lonely roads



Stephen Osman / LAT

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I'm running a marathon! I'm climbing a mountain! I'm raising awareness! It's for a good cause! Hey -- is this thing on?

By Jeannine Stein, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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EARLIER this month, Tim Borland set out to run the equivalent of 63 marathons in 63 days, consecutively, to raise money and awareness for a rare degenerative disease.

About the same time, a group of fathers began cycling across the country to help combat a rare form of children's cancer.

A New York man is in the midst of a decade-long goal to scale 10 mountains in as many years for Alzheimer's and Parkinson's research.

And a local gym owner recently spent 24 hours on an elliptical trainer to raise money for Lou Gehrig's disease.

All hope for copious dollars and national media attention for their gee-whiz exploits, but most people will never hear of their endeavors or make donations to their cause. News organizations are beset with pitches to cover such Herculean events, and many of these well-meaning men and women, most of whom have zero background in publicity, have no idea that their grueling physical feats are paltry compared to what it takes to get the "Today" show to call back.

In this realm of personal marketing, as it's called, few reap big-time national attention, says Rich Honack, adjunct professor of marketing at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University in

Evanston, Ill. "Most of these people are getting pledges from family, friends and colleagues -- it's really a close niche, and it's rare that someone breaks out of that."

Compelling a total stranger to give money is tough, he adds, especially if that stranger hasn't been touched by the cause or has no connection to it. There's a trust factor, Honack says: "People want to make sure their money is truly going to help people, not to overhead."

But onward these do-gooders run, cycle, climb, swim -- and stumble, most of them footing the bill for the exploits themselves.

"Americans tend to be optimistic people," says Jerry Swerling, director of public relations studies at the USC Annenberg School for Communication. "If you do the right thing, good things will follow."

'We had to do something'

MONDAY will be Borland's 15th day on his 63-day cross-country tour. The idea came about after the 31-year-old endurance coach from Los Gatos, Calif., befriended Jim Achilles, his church pastor, then started training him for a marathon. The pastor's 16-year-old daughter Cathryn has ataxia-telangiectasia (a progressive disease that causes degeneration of the cerebellum, gradually leading to poor muscle control). An ultra-distance runner, triathlete and adventure racer, Borland wanted to do something to help.

Doing one marathon to draw some attention didn't seem like enough. The idea snowballed into two months' worth of marathons, culminating with the New York City Marathon on Nov. 4. He also decided to run while pushing a stroller, sometimes carrying a child who has the disease, sometimes with only a sign listing names of afflicted children.

Borland began working with the A-T Children's Project (a nonprofit dedicated to raising money for research) and its public relations firm, and word of his undertaking began to spread. The tour's main sponsor, Swiss-based Octapharma, which develops and sells plasma products, is helping with trip expenses.

The logistics of traveling, setting up running routes and coordinating with local media hasn't been easy, even with a small crew helping him. That hasn't daunted Borland, whose wife and two young children are also along for the ride.

It's the poignant stories of the children and families coping with A-T that will motivate people to give, he believes: "The disease is just horrible, and it grips people. Our hope is that in the end, we'll see the amount of funds coming in increase, and that will allow us to do more clinical trials and research."

Vincent Simone decided to scale 10 mountains around the world in 10 years, to raise funds and awareness for Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease, afflictions that have struck his mother and father-in-law. The 40-year-old architect's apprentice from Amawalk, N.Y., says it's been a "tough sell" so far. "People have a hard time understanding the scope, and the reason you're trying to do something like this."

Of his extended time frame, Simone says, "Each mountain is a point to look back and see if any strides

have been made in Parkinson's or Alzheimer's research, and a chance to look ahead to the coming year, what governments will do, what people will do to step up the game."

To date, according to the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research, Simone has raised \$1,350 and generated some press coverage in local papers. Last year's attempt at reaching the summit of Mont Blanc in the Alps was cut short by bad weather conditions, and when Simone, who has nearly a decade of mountaineering experience, asked his nine-member team to come back two days later to try again, no one showed up. He did it alone, coming within 500 feet of the top.

For his upcoming trip to scale peaks in Ecuador, Simone says, "We haven't gotten much coverage at all. I can't figure out why nobody's picking it up -- we're leaving in a week."

David MacNiven, in development and donor relations for the New York City-based Fox Foundation, applauds Simone's slow but steady fundraising efforts and says, "The awareness he's raising is even more important."

Cycling across the U.S. has been done before, but never by seven fathers whose children all have neuroblastoma, a rare form of cancer most often occurring in young children.

The families had gotten to know one another while their children were being treated at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, and one day brainstormed the idea to do something monumental that they hoped would raise a large chunk of money -- \$2 million -- needed to develop a new treatment. They're calling it the Loneliest Road Campaign.

"We had to do something to get that audience, to get them to take note," says Alec Oughton, a 34-year-old firefighter from Spotsylvania, Va., who started the trip last week. "I think it's going to have a huge effect. It hasn't swept the nation, but it's getting there." If their goals aren't reached, Oughton says, "We'll be disappointed, but I think we'll come up with other options to get the message out there. We're not going to quit our kids -- that's not an option."

Sometimes a zany stunt is what's needed to get people to take notice, says Erik Flowers, owner of Body Builders Gym in Silver Lake. Flowers rode an elliptical trainer for 24 hours to raise money for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease) as part of the recent Jerry Lewis MDA Telethon.

"Even if it's wacky, it doesn't matter," he says, "if it gets somebody to think about something, if it gets into their consciousness. . . . I had people asking me what ALS stands for. I think every little bit helps."

The pluses of grass-roots effort NOT even the most cynical souls want to see these earnest individuals fall short of their objectives. But, marketing experts say, those who dream up these feats must temper their aspirations with a giant dose of reality.

"People don't understand the scale of the competition," USC's Swerling says. "To them, it's the most important cause in the world, and it's hard to understand [a reporter] is getting 10 pitches a week, and they're often a bit naive about that."

He understands why they do it -- with small budgets, no staff and scant media contacts, these charity-

minded, fit folks opt for the jaw-dropping feat done with sincere passion and heart-tugging personal stories. "You put that all together," Swerling says, "and that's a very logical route for them to take, and may be the best route to take given the options open to them."

And, acknowledges Katya Andresen, vice president of Network for Good, an Internet-based charity resource, there's something to be said for these grass-roots efforts. Blogs, YouTube and other forms of Internet communication can quickly build friend-to-friend fundraising and support, perhaps lessening the need for more traditional publicity. Even the home-grown aspect is a plus -- too slick and no one will believe the message.

"The growth of inexpensive ways to build connections to friends and family are at a historic high," says Andresen, author of "Robin Hood Marketing: Stealing Corporate Savvy to Sell Just Causes." "It's rapidly replacing the old paradigm of a charity sending direct-mail requests to a bunch of people, hoping a few will respond."

But Swerling suggests that these charitable athletes carefully analyze the reasons for their monumental undertakings before jumping in headfirst.

"If they feel the need in their own hearts and minds to make this statement, then more power to them," he says. "But if they're doing it to get other people engaged and to give money, they're probably setting themselves up for disappointment."

In some cases, there may be better ways to direct their energies.

"Maybe they should research what works and what doesn't work, and try to mobilize the base in other ways," Swerling says. "Because someone is a great long-distance swimmer doesn't mean that the best way they can contribute to a cause is by doing swimming stunts. Maybe they have a knack for organizing or communication, and they should hone those skills and share them with the rest of the community."

Polly Letofsky was somewhat naive about the ups and downs of embarking on a long-term campaign when, beginning in 1999, she set out on a five-year walk around the world to raise awareness for breast cancer (she never had the disease). On her best days she'd hold educational forums in far corners of the world, speak to a reporter or have someone tell her she had inspired them to get a mammogram. On her worst days, she says, "I'd be completely alone and start to lose that focus. It would ebb and flow quite often."

Letofsky, now 45 and living in Denver, says she's happy with what she accomplished, mostly face-to-face encounters that may have affected people's lives. About the press, she says, "Some were excited about what I was doing, and some couldn't give two hoots."

She offers this advice to those considering this kind of undertaking: "Don't be offended when no one wants to hear about it. Get over the romance of it and expect that the situation is going to be ripe for aggravation. But if you look at it properly, that can also be part of the adventure."