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A cross-country cause: cycling to fight cancer

Fund-raiser: Stephen Sroka will pay tribute to two brothers while trying to raise \$100,000 for cancer patients by cycling across the nation.

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Stephen Sroka has wanted to bike across America since he was in eighth grade. Next month, he will realize that dream while paying tribute to two brothers who were stricken with cancer.

Sroka, a 21-year-old Baltimore native, will embark on his more than 4,000-mile ride June 21.

Along the way, he will be raising money for the **Ulman Cancer Fund** for Young Adults, an Ellicott City organization. His goal is to raise \$100,000. His affiliation with the Ulman fund arose from his friendship with John and Matthew Majoros. John, 22, received a diagnosis of advanced testicular cancer in April 2001. He died the next February.

Matthew, 20, had Hodgkin's disease and testicular cancer. After undergoing months of treatment, he has been cancer-free since November.

Sroka and Matthew Majoros played lacrosse together at Mount St. Joseph High School in Baltimore. Sroka said that while his friend was sick, "I felt a sense of helplessness, as there was not much I could do other than provide care and condolence to the family."

His bike trip -- which has been named Coast to Coast for Cancer -- will benefit an organization that provides support for cancer patients ages 18 to 35 and their families, while also promoting cancer awareness and prevention.

"I think it's a great idea that he's doing it," said Matthew Majoros. Sroka is "doing the bulk of the work," but "I'm helping him out any way I can, really."

Matthew's mother, Carol Majoros, added that her family was "honored and our hearts were touched that he'd thought of us, to do this for our sons."

Sroka traces his passion for riding cross-country to the eighth grade, when a teacher who had made the trip described his experiences. Sroka decided last winter that the ideal time to embark

on the trip would be next month, after he graduates with a business degree from the Catonsville campus of the Community College of Baltimore County.

Two months ago, at a friend's urging, he decided to make the trip to benefit a charity, and chose the Ulman fund.

"I started the fund-raiser by myself," he said, setting a goal of \$5,000. Then, an instructor at CCBC took Sroka to a local Rotary Club meeting to ask for donations. "They said, 'We want to help you,'" he recalled, and at their suggestion, he raised his goal to \$100,000.

"I think it's wonderful," said Brock Yetso, executive director of the Ulman fund. The money Sroka raises will go toward college scholarships, support groups for young cancer patients and their families, online support services and awareness initiatives.

Sroka will begin his ride at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, riding to Catonsville the first day and on to Virginia the second day to join up with the TransAmerica Trail in Charlottesville. The trail crosses through Virginia, Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and ends in Astoria, Ore.

The trail is made up of bicycle-friendly roads and is traveled by approximately 4,000 bicyclists every summer, according to the Adventure Cycling Association.

Sroka is planning to cover the route in 2 1/2 months, averaging 60 miles a day. He will be traveling alone and will be self-sufficient. "I'm pulling a trailer of equipment," he said.

He plans to raise the bulk of his financial goal during the course of his ride. He is planning stops and meetings in small towns along the way, and is arranging live phone calls from the road to radio stations in Baltimore.

As he prepares for his ride, the question Sroka is asked most often is how he will occupy his mind during his long hours on the trail.

"I'm going to listen to those government tapes they use to train translators," he said. "I'm going to learn Spanish." Stephen Sroka, a 21-year-old college student, plans to bike across the United States to earn \$100,000 for cancer patient support. Sroka was inspired to raise the funds after one friend died of cancer and another -- the stricken man's brother -- underwent treatment for the disease.

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