

MAN ON A MISSION:

7,000 km Ride for the Cure

By Janice Landry



What would drive a fit, young athlete in the prime of his career to cycle across one of the biggest landmasses in the world? Janice Landry finds out.

The driving rain pounds against my windshield. The wind whips the still leafless trees and rush-hour traffic is snarled at supper-time as I make my way to the central Halifax home of 26-year-old Dalhousie University student Tony Griffin, who is from Ireland and is studying Human Kinetics at Dalhousie on scholarship.

At his house are about a dozen key members of Griffin's 60-plus volunteer team who are frantically busy preparing for his departure for the "7,000 Km Ride for the Cure."

Griffin and his dedicated team are trying to raise one million euros (about 1.5 million Canadian) to benefit three cancer charities: Ovarian Cancer Canada, the Irish Cancer Society and the Lance Armstrong Foundation.

The huge undertaking is Griffin's brainchild; he's dedicating his monumental ride to the memory of his late father Jerome, who died of lung cancer in 2005, despite the fact he never smoked. Griffin explains that his father became ill after long-term exposure to asbestos in the construction business in both Scotland and Ireland.

I also lost my father, Basil "Baz" Landry, a year ago to an illness, and admired how Griffin is taking something negative and hurtful, the loss of his beloved father, and turning it into a huge positive one that will help countless people.

Griffin, who, unbelievably, says he had never owned a bike or cycled long distances before last December, plans to ride across Canada, ending up in Halifax in late June. From the East Coast, he will fly across to his homeland, Ireland and bike the final leg of his massive 7,000 km journey, ending in Ennis, Ireland.

The six-foot-two, shaven-head Dalhousie student, speaks with a thick Irish accent. He is contagiously friendly and upbeat. His body is lean and fit, and up to the challenge that lies ahead; not just from weeks of intensive training, but also from years playing hurling in his home country. Hurling is the national sport of Ireland and is sort of like a combination of baseball and lacrosse, where players try to hit a ball down the field with a hurling stick through goal posts.

"It's been described as the fastest field sport on earth," Griffin explains.

At home, on the Emerald Isle, he is a huge sports celebrity; often playing in front of crowds of 50,000 people at Croke Park stadium in Dublin, and, last year, he won the prestigious Vodafone Hurling All-Star Award. That honour, Griffin says, changed his life.

"I grew up listening to stories about people like me."

Now, he can't walk into a store in Dublin without someone talking to him about his team, Clare, or the sport of hurling in general.

So, the big question about the whole undertaking is 'Why?'

"If you had told me that I would be spending time at Lance Armstrong's house...I would have said you were crazy," says Griffin.

Why would an elite athlete, in the prime of his career, leave hurling for a year, train like mad for months, and cycle across one of the biggest land masses in the world to raise money in the fight against cancer?

Well, that's exactly what I wanted him to answer as I arrived at his home on that blustery night in Halifax.

"Griff," as his friends call him, shares his modest Halifax home with three roommates, all of whom are students. Two of the three, Matt Bethune and Ben Whidden, are part of his tech and support team, as he pedals the 7,000 kilometers across both countries.

A fourth student, and friend, Rob Book is the final member of the crew.

Inside the house is a scene of what I can best describe as "organized chaos." Griffin's volunteer coach and exercise physiologist, Dr. Stephen Cheung, who teaches Griffin Exercise Physiology at Dalhousie, is showing the road-crew how to repair the cyclists' Trek 5000, an all carbon bike, which is valued at \$3,000. The bike is in the middle of the living room and the coach and Tony Griffin Foundation (TGF) road crewmembers are gathered around talking about its various parts.

Dr. Cheung has Griffin training exceptionally hard. Cheung takes time away from working with the crew to sit on a nearby sofa with me, where he explains the cyclists' training, just prior to the departure as, "...long, outdoor rides. Sunday we had a test ride for four-and-a-half hours to Windsor." Windsor is about a 40-minute car drive from Halifax into Nova Scotia's picturesque Annapolis Valley.

Cheung usually accompanies Griffin on the training rides to help teach the young man about pacing and other helpful techniques.

Asked why he has decided to join the TGF and volunteer on such a massive undertaking, Cheung explains, "if one of my students shows initiative, I'll go to the wall for them."

Once Griffin embarks, Coach Cheung says his student will pedal about six hours a day, averaging 160 kilometers, or 25 to 30 kilometers an hour.

Another person on-board is Todd McDonald, a sharp, young businessman and friend of Griffins who has connections within the Lance Armstrong Foundation in the United States, and who, amazingly, secured a meeting for Griffin with Armstrong, himself, in Texas.

Griffin, McDonald, and Project Manager Bruce Mansour all flew to Austin in late April and spent several hours one day with the legendary seven-time Tour de France winner at his own home, where he showed the trio his Tour de France jerseys and awards. The trio even got to cycle with Armstrong, and the whole mind-boggling event was captured on videotape as part of a documentary currently under production in Canada and Ireland about Griffin's journey.

McDonald reports that during the Austin trip, when asked about Griffin's difficult ride ahead, Armstrong said, "he can do it. He's a man with a purpose...It's very rare that an athlete at the peak of his career does something like this for a higher purpose. You can't get any more noble than that." That's quite an endorsement for a student.

Lance Armstrong even taped two greetings for the media; one for Canada and one for Ireland to be showcased on the foundation's website and at various fundraisers and media events.

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But the impossible seems to be attainable for this inspirational young man.

On one wall of Griffin's house are hand-written notes to himself that say, "Visionaries know that their thoughts decide their future." And, "Visionaries dream big, regardless of circumstance."

This young Irish visionary tries to further explain the 'Why?' question to me.

"I believe I've been given this as a mission," Griffin says of his massive undertaking, "...I want to raise awareness, celebrate life."

His mission, as mentioned, originated in Ireland, with the loss of his father, who Griffin says tirelessly supported him throughout his hurling career and life. "He was always there (at the hurling field). When we lost, he was the first person waiting for me to carry my (hurling) stick."

Griffin's mission will also end in Ireland, where he cycles the last leg of the journey in July. On those final, emotion-filled kilometers he will likely be reminiscing about his childhood, where he grew up on a small farm in Ballyea, County Clare, Ireland as the second youngest of six children. He describes the land as, "green, rolling hills." Overlooking the small village of 1,000 people is an Augustinian Monastery. It's situated near Killone Lake, where Griffin and his father would go trout fishing. The athlete says his hometown is dominated by what you might expect: a Catholic Church, a school, a hurling pitch (stadium) and a pub.

Even as a child, Griffin remembers his father always being, "...kind, honest, with strong faith...I've never seen anyone with such a work ethic."

The apple never falls far from the tree.

Griffin tries to explain his father Jerome's determination and sheer strength of will.

"Back when there was still corporal punishment in schools...my Dad, when he was a boy, stole a hurling stick." (Griffin says that his fathers' family was very poor and it was rare to be able to afford the sporting equipment.) The teacher beat a strap across Jerome's hand.

"My father said, 'I will let you break my hand before I cry for you...' You couldn't break him."

And, those of us who know Tony Griffin believe it's not likely the 7,000 kilometers on

this amazing journey of love and goodwill will break him either. "I know I am going to do it...If my legs can't turn the wheels, my dad will be there." •

Go to www.tonygriffinfoundation.com to follow Tony Griffin's progress and to donate.

