



# River Pilgrims

By Anna Segner

*The paddle from Lake Itasca to the Gulf of Mexico, about 2,350 miles, drew a variety of pilgrims to the Mississippi River this year. We asked five of them about their inner journeys during the voyage.*

## James Welborn

After shaking the principal's hand and getting his high school diploma, James Welborn practically leapt into his canoe. With high school graduation under his belt, he left his hometown of Webb, Mo., to begin canoeing from Lake Itasca on May 25. He arrived at the Gulf of Mexico on September 9.

"I actually got the idea to do this from my high school teacher. When it was mentioned that you could canoe the Mississippi River, I knew I had to do it," Welborn recalled. "Once I committed to it, I knew that the entire town was watching."

Though his mother had many sleepless nights, his family was very supportive. His father paddled with him the first week. After that, it was just Welborn alone with his canoe.

"I was looking forward to adventure, and then it was finally there. In that way it was almost kind of sad. It was also the realization that it was the last time that I was going to see my family in a while."

The trip taught Welborn about being on his own. He was struck with excitement over his new found independence. "I was kind of thrown into the big world, and I had to learn to act for myself."

His exploration of his independence also gave him a new perspective on his spirituality. Welborn said that one of his reasons for traveling alone was to gain a closer relationship with God.

"I knew God was watching out for me the whole way down. I grew up believing that God would look out for me, but he proved it."

The end of his journey brought emotions that Welborn said he will never forget. His family, who he had not seen for months, videotaped him as he canoed into the Gulf of Mexico.

"Man, I don't even think there are words for that moment. That was the best experience that I have ever felt in the entire world. After being on the water for three and a half months, I saw the clearing with no more trees, and I went around the river bend, and there was nothing but the big blue ocean. It is such a feeling to know that you are coming home."

Since completing his voyage, Welborn has had time to think about his next adventure.

"After the holidays, I think that I will be enlisting in the army and starting a new adventure there."



(Ryan Johnson)

## Ellen McDonah

As soon as Ellen McDonah returned to her home in Trempealeau, Wis., she began creating a body of artwork inspired by paddling the entire Mississippi River alone. This had been a goal since she was young.

Now retired from her career as a teacher, she was able to live that dream. She started paddling May 25 at Lake Itasca and ended her journey on September 8 at the Gulf.

Besides being one of the few (if not the first) female solo paddlers to kayak the entire Mississippi, her journey was perhaps unique in that she was creating art throughout.

"I gifted to the people that I met along the way. I feel very fortunate that I was able to do that," noted McDonah. She works with oil and acrylic paints, and enjoys sketching. Her supplies were limited to what she felt comfortable carrying on her kayak.

McDonah discovered what the body is capable of. "The first two weeks I was developing strength and endurance. It is amazing how the body responds to challenge." Despite averaging 25 to 30 miles a day, she experienced few aches and pains.

Positivity was the golden rule. "I always remained focused on my goal, which was to reach the Gulf and have fun. It was rather easy to keep a positive attitude. Basically, I was living outside, and it was beautiful," recalled McDonah. "I was not on any schedule, so I adjusted decisions based on what I came across."

McDonah also faced fear, but she responded by focusing on understanding situations and making decisions based on her skill level.

While McDonah kayaked alone, she felt support from her family, friends, teaching colleagues and the people she encountered along the way.

A defining moment was when she hit the ocean. "When I saw that there was no more land and I realized that I was at the Gulf, it was total ecstasy."

She took time to investigate and spent the evening at the Gulf. "I got to see totally different things than I saw on the river: sharks, hermit crabs and shells. I wanted to revel in my victory. It was the bow on the package."

Besides creating artwork inspired by her trip, she is considering writing about her experience. Meanwhile though, she may be dreaming up her next big adventure.



## Gary and Linda De Kock

Sharing marriage is one thing, but sharing a tandem kayak for 70 straight days is quite another. Gary and Linda De Kock, from Grand Rapids, Mich., celebrated their 42nd wedding anniversary paddling on the Mississippi.

"I've always said that if you can kayak together, you can be married," said Gary.

From July 19 to September 26, Gary and Linda paddled from Lake Itasca to the Gulf. "It was a lot of together time," laughed Linda as Gary chimed in that they were smart to bring along a three-person tent, with a few inches of extra space.

As much as the couple jokes about their voyage together, they agree that their already strong marriage made it possible.

"A tandem kayak requires a lot of trust and teamwork. We've always had the ability to work together. It is a skill that we have been building for our entire lives, but this quite literally meant that we had to sink or swim together," said Gary.

Linda agreed and said she has not met anyone else that she would have been comfortable kayaking the entire Mississippi with. "I trust Gary to the point where if I ask him 'are we okay?' and he responds 'yes,' I will believe him 100 percent."

Their differences enhanced the trip.

"We look at the same river and see different things. You could see that as a strength or a weakness, but I see it as a strength," said Linda. For example, while Gary liked to be methodical in processes, such as unpacking the kayak, Linda took time to talk with people along the way and ask for advice.

Both Gary and Linda think of their trip as an epic, mythological experience.

"You are in this landscape of giants: crane ships, huge barges and loading facilities. And here we are in our tiny kayak creeping in like a little mouse," Gary explained.

"You can really feel the bigness of the river and nature and the smallness of ourselves," said Linda.

Both Linda and Gary said that age was a major motivation for the trip. "We are so grateful that we were able to do this in our 60s. We both retired a year ago, and we are aware that our time left is limited," said Linda. "It was a huge gift and privilege to have accomplished this."

The idea began as a way to raise money and awareness for Water for People, an organization that campaigns for safe drinking water, sanitation services and education. They raised over \$16,000.

"Because we were doing it for a cause, our discomforts didn't matter because we viewed ourselves as a part of a bigger picture," said Linda.



## Conor Emser

The idea to paddle the entire Mississippi was born in a text message exchange between childhood friends Conor Emser and Evan Weisenberger. Then, friends Tony Yandek and Beau Hartman signed up. Though they lacked kayaking experience, they paddled out of Lake Itasca on May 19 and arrived at the Gulf on July 25.

Their journey fit into summer break,

as all four are college students. Emser is from Brampton, Ontario, and studies Communications at Ohio University. Weisenberger, from Weslake, Ohio, and Yandek, from Brunswick, Ohio, are both engineering students at the University of Akron. Hartman is also from Westlake, Ohio, and is a student of ecotourism and adventure travel at Hocking College.

Their journey, which they dubbed "Paddle Home," raised awareness and money for affordable housing. Once a week, they parked their kayaks and volunteered for Habitat for Humanity.

"We were more or less homeless throughout our trip, and we took that struggle to heart. We feel more passion for that difficulty now," said Emser. While the group was welcomed into many homes along the way, Emser admitted that finding a space to set up camp became difficult, especially in the Lower Mississippi. "We ended up doing more sleeping in city parks than anything," he recalled. "It was most definitely the most mentally challenging challenge that I have ever taken on in my life."

The end of the journey provided some of their most challenging days. During the last week, Yandek discovered a hole in the bottom of his kayak. Fortunately, duct tape did the trick and brought him through to the end.

Their last day, however, was the most difficult. "We all woke up at 4 a.m. feeling ... well I can't really describe it. There was just so much energy. I knew I was about to conquer one of the best challenges of my life," said Emser. "It was lightening outside, and of course we were near all of the shipping ports and ocean liners. It was so windy and stormy that we were actually close to calling it quits, but I'm glad we didn't. When we finished, there was just so much joy and relief. I felt so accomplished."

Emser felt that the group grew stronger and closer during the many 10-hour days paddling.

"Fifty-five days out there gives you a lot of time to separate yourself from real life. We became closer. We talked about life and relationships. It felt like we really understood each other. It is indescribable." 🌊 🛶