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HOME AFTER VISITING 49 STATE CAPITOLS for Rotary International's PolioPlus awareness program, Bob Mutchler sits astride his motorcycle. He will ride to the 50th state capitol, Juneau, in September. *Folsom Life photo by Tom Paniagua*

Polio survivor and motorcyclist takes 18,000-mile road trip

By Patrick Ibarra, Staff writer

(08.04.05) Folsom resident Bob Mutchler wanted to raise awareness across the country for Rotary International's PolioPlus program. He decided the best way to spread the word to each state was to visit each one personally, by motorcycle.

In September, he'll end the journey, visiting Juneau, Alaska to finish the 18,000-mile-plus odyssey.

Mutchler's already traveled to 49 state capitols and 10 Canadian provincial capitols. Once he finishes Alaska, he'll be able to rest, until he gets the itch again.

"This particular ride is the most difficult event I've ever done," said Mutchler, a 58-year-old Rotarian. "I've done what people say are impossible things, but when I look back in retrospect, everything is easy in comparison. This was difficult."

Mutchler, a polio survivor and paraplegic, began the trip in Hawaii in late April, flown over by Hawaiian Rotarians, and rode with his wife on the islands to raise awareness for PolioPlus, a program launched in 1985 to protect children from polio and now aiming to eradicate it worldwide.

"That's how we kicked the ride off," said Mutchler, who rides a specially designed BMW motorcycle with a hand shift and a sidecar to prevent from falling over. "It was very successful. The whole purpose was to raise attention for PolioPlus"

He flew back to Sacramento, where he began his mainland journey, which spread over all 48 states and ended in Chicago, Ill. in less than three months. Due to weather constraints, Mutchler had to stop the trip short of Alaska, but will go in September to complete the adventure.

"Rotary International initiated its polio eradication effort in 1985 and that is how long, Bob, who was diagnosed with polio at the age of nine months, has been committed to doing his part to raise awareness for PolioPlus," said Anne Rhea, member of the Centennial Ride Committee

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that helped Mutchler put the ride on. "Even though he suffers from Post-Polio Syndrome, Bob is a stellar example of how the human spirit can triumph over physical limitations. Who would have ever thought that the child who spent three years in an iron lung after being diagnosed with polio would one day ride so many thousands of miles in a quest to help eradicate polio forever?"

Mutchler had a rough ride along the way. Weather put a damper on many parts of the travel, having him ride through extreme heat and cold, as well as rain and sleet.

"We hit an ice storm," Mutchler said. "It rained virtually every day but two. Sometimes during the day we had rain, snow, ice, hail, sleet, crosswinds and headwinds. A hill turned into four inches of slushy ice, then two more inches of marble sized hail dropped."

It was in such conditions that Mutchler lost his riding partner, Australian Tony Hennessy, who crashed and needed shoulder surgery, leaving Mutchler solo for the rest of the trip.

Each capitol Mutchler stopped in he spoke at, sharing his knowledge and experience with polio and the program trying to eliminate it. He said the PolioPlus project is 99 percent complete, with the entire world nearly polio free.

"We can't let up anywhere in the world because if we do we become potential candidates for this to crop up again," said Mutchler, who has done endurance rides for the program four times prior to the Centennial Ride. "I made a promise in 2001 to ride until we're done."

"Bob is a polio survivor, a Rotarian, a speaker and an endurance motorcyclist," said Bill McKenna, a Rotarian of Augusta, Maine who rode through Australia with Mutchler in 2003. "He has chosen to combine all of that to benefit the PolioPlus effort. On his rides he will ride upwards of 1000 miles a day, plus gas stops, food, meetings, press conferences and talking, talking, talking. They are very long days, and not just one or two days running, but 15 to 30 days in a row. His work is not your everyday story."

McKenna knows the challenges endurance rides can put forth, and admires Mutchler's will.

"He's a dedicated man on a special motorcycle, on crutches, on a mission, with a story to tell about a special effort,' McKenna said. 'I've seen him bring tears to the eyes of 80 grown men and women by the story he told. He's seen polio's devastation. He has lived his own story. People listen.

"Is it easy? Absolutely not. Imagine a road trip in your SUV, 1000 miles a day for 30 days. Now get out of your air conditioned cab, get astride a motorcycle, in temperatures from 36 to 100-plus degrees, with rain, sun and dirt, staying alert so that you stay alive. There's strange food, strange beds, you're beaten by the wind at 70 miles per hour for hours at a time, day in and day out. You're up at the crack of dawn. It's physically, emotionally, financially and intellectually demanding. In Australia, I lost about 40 pounds in 30 days. And then there's the pain. A normal, healthy man will experience pain and inflammation on a regular basis, beginning the second day or so, without Post Polio Syndrome, which Bob has now. I cannot begin to imagine what that feels like."

Mutchler's already impressed, inspired and educated thousands all over the United States. With the completion of his ride, he'll finally impress himself, at least until the next ride comes along.

"Whenever I finish something like this, it's a definite sense of accomplishment," he said. "It was something major. It was something great. I'm proud of what I've done. It was certainly not just

another day."

For more information about Bob Mutchler, log onto www.PolioPlusRide.org. For more information about the PolioPlus Program, log onto www.rotary.org/foundation/polioplus.

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