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Binghamton man beats odds in ocean trek

\$100,000 raised for cancer fight in 3,000-mile journey

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The Miracle on the Hudson hadn't yet happened. George W. Bush still lived in the White House. Binghamton University hadn't been part of March Madness.

The date was Jan. 1, and it was the last time - until today, perhaps - that Paul Ridley saw a fellow human being.

The 25-year-old Binghamton High School graduate hopes that changes today, when he expects to arrive on a small island in the eastern Caribbean, ending a trans-Atlantic journey of 3,000 miles and almost 90 days alone in a 19-foot rowboat, Liv. In that time, Ridley endured some sleepless nights, the occasional 20-foot waves, and a couple of swim-bys from a shark - powered only by his strong back, several good sets of oars, and the occasional ocean current.



"There's tightness all over, and I'm sore all the time," Ridley said last week. "But while my body is telling me 'no,' my mind is telling me that I can finish this."

Binghamton native Paul Ridley, 25, has almost completed his "Row for Hope" across the Atlantic Ocean in a 19-foot yellow rowboat. The journey is raising money toward a cure for the cancer that took his mother's life.

Ridley's voice sounded clear and strong during a 20-minute call via satellite phone from his seat in the boat about 100 miles east of Antigua, despite a night-time temperature in the 80s, a humidity figure in the same neighborhood, and another day of pulling on the oars pretty much from dawn to dusk.

He was planning to end the row today in English Harbor, Antigua. Ridley's Twitter feed reported late Saturday that he was 37 miles away from Antigua. Technically, the Atlantic crossing was complete when he reached a point that's even with a point in eastern Barbados.

"I'm physically and emotionally exhausted," he said. But, he quickly added, "I'm certainly learning a ton about perseverance."

He paused.

"I guess that would be the understatement of the century."

"Oh, #%@#!"

Ridley, who lives and works in Connecticut, began rowing while a student at Colgate University in Hamilton. He and his sister, Joy, hatched the idea of an ocean row as a way to raise money for cancer research in honor of their mother, Katherine Raub Ridley, who lost her life to the disease in 2001.

Ridley knew he would face adversity ranging from the blistering sun to the Atlantic storms when he and his sister began planning the effort three Christmases ago. But there was little he could do to prepare for:

* A steering mechanism that broke less than a month into the row.

* A machine that purifies salt water failed - twice. The first time, rower became repairman. The second time, with a wrench he described as having rusted into a useless lump of metal, Ridley began rationing his drinking water.

* An alarm designed to go off if a ship approached during the night didn't provide much notice on Day 33, resulting in an uncomfortably close call with an oil tanker whose pilot hadn't expected a 19-foot rowboat to be crossing a shipping lane. The freighter came within about 200 yards - close enough for Ridley to see the name Nordic Cosmos painted on the side of the reddish hull.

One line of his blog entry described his reaction:

"I take a glance to my immediate left and ...OH, #%@#!"

Complete determination

The satellite phone and a PDA have kept Ridley connected to the outside world, enabling him to make daily blog posts and do a few media interviews, like the one last week with CNN. From elementary school classes in Broome County to rowers around the globe, encouragement has poured in via Ridley's blog.

The phone also facilitated nightly conversations with Paul's dad, the Rev. Mark Ridley of Binghamton, and other key supporters.

During those calls, the son would tell the father what he accomplished that day. Father would help son set the next day's goals.

"He showed nothing but complete determination," said Mark Ridley, who flew with friends and family last week to await Paul's arrival. "He would almost always focus on the day at hand. I learned early on that he didn't want to talk about Antigua."

What Paul Ridley did want to do was honor his mother's memory by increasing awareness about skin cancer, and by raising as much as \$500,000 for research into the disease in an effort he

called "Row for Hope." One hundred miles from Antigua, the effort had raised about \$100,000, but Ridley isn't letting that deter him. He believes more contributions will roll in as the row is completed and media attention increases.

And there's always the future.

"Sure, an ocean row for a great cause is hard to top," he said. "But I'm still only 25, and it would be against my personality if I never did anything else."