



Gary Fitch Gary Fitch will begin in International Falls a 300-mile walk to the Minnesota Capitol in St. Paul on April 4, 2014. The walk is intended to raise enough money to buy 10 million pounds of food every year for Minnesotans in need.

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Creating a miracle

By EMILY GEDDE Staff Writer

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Gary Fitch has one goal in mind – to eliminate hunger in Minnesota. During the next year, the Twin Cities native is asking for support and donations towards his initiative, Minnesota Miracle, a 300-mile walk from International Falls to the Minnesota Capitol in St. Paul. According to Fitch, the effort will raise \$30 million — enough to supply 10 million pounds of food each year to Minnesotans in need.

“Minnesota is about to set an example for the rest of the country,” Fitch told The Journal this week. “It’s a grass roots labor movement... We’re going to establish a glow in Minnesota by taking care of our own...It’s gotta start some place, why not here?”

Wednesday, Fitch, a recently retired mail carrier for the United States Postal Service, was in International Falls to speak to and ask for support from the Koochiching Labor Assembly, which represents unions from Koochiching County, as well as the Joint Union Council, which represents Boise Inc. employees.

“He had a great presentation,” said Mike Holden, president of the Koochiching Labor Assembly. “(Joint Union Council leaders) had a lot on their mind with what is going on with Boise and they took the time to listen to him. Some were even laughing, which was nice to see.”

When considering the 30-day walk that will begin in Borderland on April 4, 2014, Fitch said walking 10 miles per day “is nothing.”

“I walked more than that each day delivering mail,” he said of his 31-year career.

He hopes next year’s walk will not be a solo trek. During the next 11 months, Fitch will not only ask for donations towards the effort, he is encouraging fellow union members, politicians, professional athletes, students and everyone who is able, to join him.

“Even if they want to walk a few blocks, I’m more than happy to have anyone,” he said.

Fitch said his ambitions spark from his realization that too many kids in the state are going to bed and going to school hungry.

“If they’re hungry, they’re not coming up with all the ideas for the toys I want when I’m 80 years old,” he joked. “I want to keep them fed so they’re sharp when they go to school.”

On a serious note, Fitch said he knew he had to do something about the growing hunger problem throughout the state.

Almost two years after the idea began to take the form of a real effort, Fitch said he has now partnered with Second Harvest Heartland, the largest hunger relief organization in the Upper Midwest, and he has also gained support from the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, known as the AFL-CIO, the largest federation of unions in the United States.

“I’m inviting everyone to bring their family and friends,” he said of next year’s walk. “I want to see 20,000 to 30,000 people walking from White Bear Lake to the capitol with me on the last day of my walk – May 4, 2014. It’s a Sunday, so nobody has an excuse not to be there.”

History of helping

Fitch is no stranger to big efforts with sizable goals. His resume of helping others includes biking in 1974 from St. Paul to Memphis, Tenn., raising money for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital; in 1989, he delivered 4,000 letters from kids suffering from cancer to former President George H.W. Bush.

And following the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, Fitch was inspired to make a difference by biking from Seattle, Wash., to Washington D.C., gathering letters of hopes and dreams from children across the country. By the time the journey was complete, Fitch had collected more than 23,000 letters, which he put on a flash drive that was placed on board the Space Shuttle Atlantis in 2009.

"They put a ring of hope around the planet 197 times," Fitch said of those who wrote letters. "And each of them got a certificate of authenticity from NASA...When I take on a responsibility of a job, I don't quit until it's done."

Fitch has touched the lives of thousands of people and he said he almost wasn't around to do any of it.

"I shouldn't have my life to begin with," he explained.

In 1971, a drunk driver ran Fitch off the road leaving his car looking like a crushed aluminum can, 169 stitches in his face, little function in his right leg and no recollection of who he or his family was. He was 19 years old at the time.

"Because I'm here, there's gotta be some logic behind it," the now 61-year-old said. "I didn't die for a reason."

And now there's Minnesota Miracle.

Fitch plans to put all the money the effort raises in an endowment that will generate \$1.3 million in annual interest.

"The endowment won't even be touched," he said. "The interest alone will buy the 10 million pounds of food.....We're going to create a miracle."