

From Portland to Moscow Walking for Peace

by Lori Stephens

"The journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step," said Lao Tzu. An historic step is being taken this summer in the form of an international event created to focus awareness on ending the arms race.

The American Soviet Walk, as the event is officially titled, is providing 200 Americans and 200 Soviet citizens the opportunity to travel together, June 8 to July 12, from Leningrad to Moscow, covering a distance of 450 miles.

The event was conceived and organized by The International Peace Walk, Inc., of Orange County, California, in conjunction with the Soviet Peace Committee of Moscow. Some of the IPW organizers were involved in the 1986 Great Peace March, last year's 3,700 mile march from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C. The American Soviet Walk was created as an extended demonstration of the ideals which motivated that march.

Two Northwest Portland residents, Karen Lauer and Matt Bissonette, are participating in the American Soviet Walk, along with several other Oregonians and representatives of 31 American states. Lauer participated in the nine-month cross-continental trek last year, and by keeping in touch with her fellow marchers, discovered both the information and the enthusiasm which led her to join the American Soviet Walk.

For Bissonette, who was involved in the last weeks of the Great Peace March, this year's event marks the beginning of increased political activity toward the goals of world peace.

"Last summer was just a taste, and this is the first real step into being more socially conscious about the

***We share the same biology
Regardless of ideology,
What might save us, me and you,
is that the Russians love their children, too.***

(from "Russians" by Sting)

issues of continued existence on Earth and peace," he says, "and it's kind of stepping into it in an awfully big way."

Lauer relates about the 1986 peace march: "I don't know how many times I heard, as we were walking across the country, 'Well, this is fine, but you couldn't do this in the Soviet Union.' So it's going to be really good for the American people to see it happening there . . . to know that it is able to happen, that there are people actively working for peace in the Soviet Union, too."

Neither Lauer nor Bissonette has been to the Soviet Union before, and for them, the peace walk is an opportunity to dismiss some of the stereotypes held of the Soviets. Bissonette says that his personal background is "pretty conservative" and that some of the stereotypes he has encountered are that the Soviets are "a cold people, and that they're not friendly, and that it's an ugly country."

"This is an opportunity for me to be able to go and observe the people and show them who we are, and to be able to bring what we find back to the people in the United States that have that stereotype," he says.

The best way to end the arms race and its threat of nuclear destruction, Bissonette believes, is through per-

sonal contact. "The best place to start is dealing with the people and getting the people to realize that, hey, we're all just a bunch of people working together, and we're not all wanting to blow each other up."

Selection for the American Soviet Walk included a written application, a physical exam, and a telephone interview with the IPW organizers in Irvine, California. Bissonette says that in his observation of the selection process, he saw that the participants represented a wide variety of groups, ages, and walks of life. Children and older people will also participate, and for Bissonette, an added positive element of the walk will be the company of his mother, who decided to join the effort after learning of it through him.

Because of the great distance to be covered, and the logistics of moving such a large group of people, the walking will be supplemented with transportation by bus, train, and boat. About half of the 450 miles from Leningrad to Moscow will be covered on foot, which will require 5 to 15 miles of walking each day, a "pretty reasonable" goal, Bissonette says. The walkers will camp outdoors and also stay in facilities such as churches, schools, and even private homes for some of the time.

Lauer and Bissonette relate that the routine jobs such as cooking and dish-washing will be rotated throughout the group, and everyone will take a day off from walking to help with chores. They believe that even this aspect of job-sharing will help form a bond with their companions, especially if some of them do not share a common language.

"It helps you to communicate," Bissonette says. "If you have a dishroom full of a couple Americans and a couple Russians, then we'll have to be able to communicate somehow . . . get dish singing songs going, or something."

Each walker needed to raise \$2,500 for the trip, which includes air fare and all ground costs for the month. Bissonette and Lauer say that while they raised most of the funds themselves, they did mail letters asking for contributions and believe that the mailing was a positive act for peace. "Even sending letters asking for money was a way to spread the word," Lauer states. The letters invoked their readers to think, even briefly, about the significance of the American Soviet Walk, and allowed those who were unable to participate in person to contribute financially to the event, she says.

In addition to approval to conduct the walk, the Soviet Peace Exchange granted IPW representatives permission to conduct a variety of cultural and media exchanges. These include a Fourth of July concert in Moscow with a worldwide television broadcast, presentation of American television programs and films, and a broadcast of Casey Kasem's "American Top 40 Countdown" on Soviet radio.

Bissonette and Lauer hope that a great number of American citizens and politicians will take notice of the peace walk and that it will be "a step in the right direction" toward the goal of ending the American-Soviet arms race.

"Hopefully the media will pick it up for what it is—a positive note towards peace—and that it will get the press that it deserves," Bissonette notes.

"It is geared for the media, geared for the President, and Gorbachev, and for all the Senators to hear . . . they will have to take note of the American people saying that this is what we want," adds Lauer.

Part of the motivation to join in events such as the American Soviet Walk, Lauer says, is that "it is a way to reclaim our power in our government. For our system to work, we really need to be responsible."

Bissonette and Lauer state that events such as this one help people to find the strength to stand up for their beliefs. They also believe that any amount of participation in events of social statement, whether it is walking for peace or writing a letter to Washington, D.C., helps people to overcome feelings of helplessness and insignificance.

As peace walkers, Lauer and Bissonette say that there are important and specific things they would like to share with the people they meet and live with during the American Soviet Walk. The primary issue is "that there are Americans working for peace, people who are concerned about the arms race," Lauer says.

The second element is that they feel it will be significant for their fellow walkers to hear American citizens speaking openly about their government in terms of praise or criticism.

Lastly, they wish to share themselves as individuals, to identify with the Soviets in a very personal way. Lauer sums up her feelings about the peace walk by stating: "Anytime you can make a human contact, I think it helps us be more understanding and less likely to be aggressive and act quickly against each other."

[Lori Stephens graduated from the University of Oregon and is a freelance writer living in Portland.]

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