

Taking a long walk through the valley of homelessness

BY DEVAN SCHWARTZ
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When Stephen Millhouse was a child he had a speech impediment known as rhotacism, which replaces 'r' with 'w.' He wanted to be a rock star, so when he'd say this it sounded like "I want to be a walk star." This summer Stephen has become a real-life walk star — embarking on a foot-powered journey from Missoula, Mont., to Los Angeles to raise awareness about homelessness.

Stephen looked deep inside himself to gain inspiration for his project, My One Man March for the Homeless. He reflected on a former career as a marine, his pursuit of two college degrees at the University of Montana, time working as an actor, and on his own experiences of homelessness. But Stephen tells me that the precipitating event was the death of his niece Rachel in a drunk-driving accident.

Now while walking Western America's highways, Stephen photographs highway crosses and remembers Rachel. A Dixon Rollerpack, combination backpack and wheeled cart, carries his possessions. He talks to me from Twin Falls, Idaho where he's seeking care for his foot, which may have a march-induced fracture.

The idea for his 1,460 mile trip came from the average miles walked per year by someone who is homeless. Millhouse says a homeless person walks 3 to 5 miles per day, which he averaged to 4, and then multiplied by 365. His route will take him through Montana, Idaho, Nevada, and California. By Thanksgiving he intends to arrive in Los Angeles. It's in L.A. where he first experienced homelessness and learned of a pervasive level of homelessness.

On his Web site, Millhouse seeks sponsorships of a penny a mile and has set the ambitious goal of raising \$1 million. Though he knows this total is unlikely to materialize, he's excited to use proceeds for

a granting process to organizations and gifts to worthy individuals. (The non-profit status is still pending.)

But Millhouse recognizes that the more important element is not a monetary one but a human one.

"I'd like to see people break down the barriers of perception between themselves and the homeless," he says. "I want people to break down that stereotype and actually participate, whether that's volunteering or even just talking."

"Talking can be a lot more nourishing than food — sometimes it's better to give your time than to give money. Find out where homeless people are from. Say 'hi' when you see them on the street. So often they're not even acknowledged as human."

"If I fail miserably on the fundraising I won't see it as a failure. A lot of the effects of my trip I probably won't see anyway — the one person who decides to go down to the local shelter and then changes someone else's life."

The night I talked to him, Stephen slept on the lawn of an old Catholic church. He will think about making it over the Sierra Nevada passes before snow hits. He will rest his feet, plan his route, update his Web site and look for shelters and soup kitchens down the road. He will laugh about all the beer cans on the side of the highway, the ones telling him which counties prefer Budweiser or Coors.

"At the very least I'm making the attempt to do something," Stephen says. "I was tired of sitting on the sidelines. I've been given so much in my life that I wanted to do this. I wanted to walk the walk."

While many people attempt America's great space through hikes, from the Appalachian Trail to the Pacific Crest, Stephen Millhouse's foot-powered trip is unique, securing his walk star status.

Follow Stephen's progress at:
myonemanmarch.org/

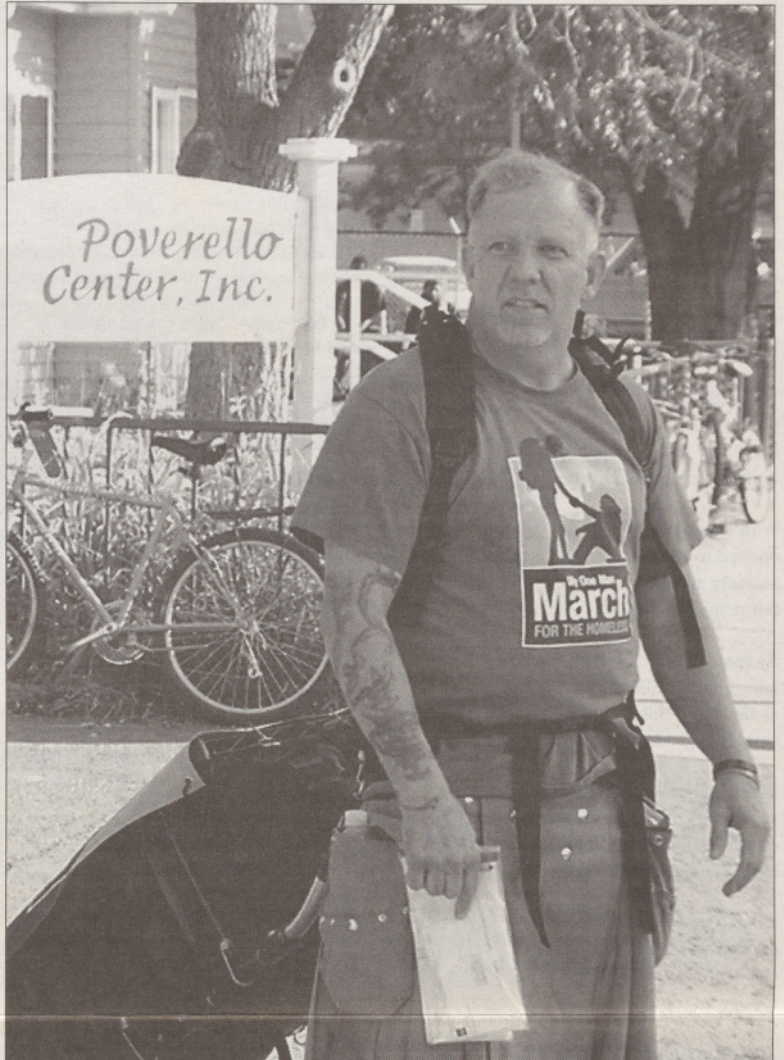


PHOTO COURTESY OF STEPHEN MILLHOUSE
Stephen Millhouse setting out on his 1,460 walk to raise awareness about homelessness.



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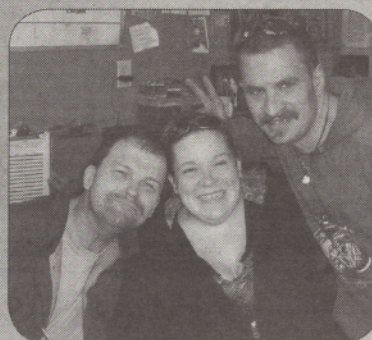
Library Location & Hours:
Wednesdays, 10-2 Skidmore Fountain.
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To find out more about the project, or to donate paperbacks, contact Laura Moulton: laura@ideacog.net.

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