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Million Mile Man Chew completes an epic trip

By [Karen Price](#), PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Friday, January 22, 2010

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To show the exact route he and his nephew took on their bike trip this summer, Squirrel Hill's Danny Chew pulled out a stack of well-worn road maps.

Pennsylvania. Ontario. Manitoba. Saskatchewan. Yukon Territory. Alaska.

A green marker highlighted the roads traveled. Black dots indicated where they spent the night. Numbers indicated the day of the trip, stretching into the 80s, 90s, over 100.

Chew, 47, calls himself the Million Mile Man in reference to his lifetime goal of riding 1 million miles. He's crossed the country on his bike numerous times, too. But even for him, this was a lot.

And yet the undertaking — riding a bike from Pittsburgh to Alaska then to Florida — wasn't even Chew's idea. It was his 18-year-old nephew, Steven Perezluha, of Longwood, Fla., who wanted to see Alaska after watching the 2007 movie "Into the Wild," based on the true story of a young man who leaves civilization behind to go live off the land in the Alaskan wilderness.

"I just loved how (Christopher McCandless) wanted to have a life of freedom, on the road, heading to Alaska," Perezluha said. "It inspired me."

So on June 21, the first day of summer, Perezluha and Chew left Pittsburgh and headed north. Forty-seven days later they crossed the border into Alaska. On Oct. 31, Halloween, they reached the end of their 19-week, 12,000-mile journey when they reached Perezluha's home just outside Orlando.

The best part of the whole trip for Chew?

"Seeing the sign that read, 'Welcome to Alaska,'" Chew said. "It just seemed to take forever to get there."

MILLION MILE MAN

Chew, 47, doesn't work, isn't married and lives in the Squirrel Hill home in which he grew up with his mother, Sally. Chew is a different breed. He's eccentric, not in a threatening way, but it can be disarming when he accurately guesses the height, weight and shoe size of people he's just met. He has a degree in mathematics from Pitt, wears distractingly thick glasses, and asks, 'OK?' a lot, as if he's used to people not being able to follow along.

He is also passionate about cycling to the extent most would call obsessive.

An eight-time finisher and two-time winner of the Race Across America, which is exactly what it sounds like, Chew estimates he will reach his million mile by the time he turns 70, "If I don't get hit by a car first." To date, he's at

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655,000 lifetime miles, all meticulously logged into diaries he's kept since he was a teenager. They chronicle not just mileage but also route, temperature, riding partners and any unusual sights along the way.

Chew simply lives to ride, so the proposition of traveling more miles than he'd ever ridden in a single trip was too good to pass up, especially with his nephew by his side.

For 19 weeks, riding was all they did. Pulling trailers that weighed about 100 pounds and carried all their supplies, they averaged 12 to 13 miles per hour and 100 miles per day. They camped most of the way and ate meals wherever they could find them on the cheap, from buffets to convenience stores.

In early August, they reached Alaska. They were met by Perezluha's parents, who outfitted the pair with cell phones and satellite tracking devices to monitor their progress on-line, and spent the next two weeks touring the state.

Minus the swarms of bugs that encrusted their tent at night and kept pursuit during the day, the trip up was surprisingly trouble-free.

Coming back was a different story.

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

Both Chew and Perezluha crashed, Chew in the Yukon Territory at 25 miles per hour and Perezluha near Kamloops, British Columbia, coming down a mountain at 36 miles per hour. Remarkably, both walked away from their accidents and were able to continue after a couple of days' recovery.

But crashes weren't the only problems. Perezluha got sick, either from bad water or bad food, he isn't sure which, and was down and out for several days. Then, just outside Steamboat Springs, Colo., his bike had had enough. The frame cracked and he had to buy a new one.

Then in eastern Colorado and western Kansas, because of the delays from accidents, illness and mechanical problems, they ran into snow, ice and freezing temperatures, the worst weather they experienced the whole trip.

"We were ready to be through, but we knew we weren't going to stop," Chew said. "We had to go on."

If it wasn't for the kindness of strangers, the trip could have been a lot worse.

When Chew crashed, a passerby stopped to help, drove his trailer into town, took the pair to a market to buy food, and then to a campground. When Perezluha wrecked, a man driving an RV stopped, helped him get cleaned up and get medical attention, then gave them money to get a motel room that night.

Bike mechanics would often offer repairs free of charge. If the elements were inhospitable, Chew and Perezluha usually found people who weren't. "We'd go knock on someone's door and say, 'Can we pitch a tent in your front yard?' and most of the time they'd say yes," Chew said. "Sometimes they'd invite us in to get a shower and a meal, so that was nice."

Chew and Perezluha even spent two nights in the basement of a church in Goodland, Kansas, after temperatures dipped to a high of 28 degrees and the roads were sheets of ice.

"The generosity and hospitality of people along the way was really encouraging," Chew said. "Most of the people were supportive once we told them what we were doing."

THE BUS

Chew and Perezluha traveled across 24 states and six Canadian provinces on their trip, but the one thing Perezluha desperately wanted to see, he couldn't.

He wanted to see the bus.

McCandless lived for four months in an abandoned bus near Denali National Park before his body was found, starved to death, by hunters on Sept. 6, 1992. But just as a swollen river kept McCandless from returning to civilization when he tried, friends in Fairbanks told Perezluha the rivers were simply too high to get to the bus.



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"I didn't like the feeling of leaving not even trying to go see it, but I told myself to be smart," Perezluha said. "Plus, I got to the point where it became my own adventure. I based the whole trip around "Into the Wild," but it became my trip. I wasn't doing it for (McCandless). This was my trip."

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