

# Longwood's Steven Perezluha, 18, journeys to Alaska - and back - on his bike

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Steven Perezluha left his home in Longwood on June 8 on his trusty racing bike, three days after graduating from Lake Mary High. He wore his yellow racing jersey, black bike shorts and a helmet.

The maps he stashed away were highlighted with back roads and bike trails that crisscrossed the United States and Canada, a distinct path that would guide him for the next 6,000 miles.

Steven Perezluha was headed for Alaska.

Before you go thinking it, Perezluha is not crazy. Not by a long shot.

No, Steven Perezluha is a driven, determined young man who set out to do what he had been taught: he went for it all.

"I've always wanted to be out there on my own, to control where I go for my destiny -- just me and my

bike," he said.

It became Perezluha's mission to get himself to Alaska after seeing *Into the Wild*, a film adaptation of the book by Jon Krakauer that chronicled the life story of Chris McCandless. The 24-year-old McCandless most likely starved to death in the Alaska wilderness inside an abandoned bus.

Perezluha first came up with the idea in July 2008. Though he had only been cycling for three years, he comes from a family of cyclists. His mother, Carol, participated in the Bikecentennial race across the United States in 1976.

His uncle, Danny Chew, won two Race Across America cycling events and completed the race solo eight times. His goal in life is to ride 1 million miles.

Perezluha always looked up to his uncle, who lives in Pittsburgh. So naturally, he asked his uncle to come along with him to Alaska.

"I knew this could be a once-in-a-lifetime deal," Chew says.

The reaction from those who knew Perezluha best ranged from teasing, "Sure you're going to ride your bike to Alaska!" to incredulity, "I thought he was kidding!" to wonderment, "You're going to fly back home, right? No?"

Perezluha is gifted athletically. He ran cross-country and track at Lake Mary, and he wrestled, too. But soon he dedicated himself to training for this Alaska

trip. He would wake up at 4 a.m. every Saturday morning, make himself a huge egg breakfast, and ride for the entire day, either out to Tampa and back, or to the Ocala National Forest and back or to Cape Canaveral and back.

He enlisted the help of his friends. Perezluha had one of his best friends, Dejan Lukic, get in a shopping cart. He would then tie the cart to the back of his bike and ride for 25 miles, to help build his strength. On the Alaska trip, Perezluha would be lugging up to 100 pounds of gear behind him.

Perezluha always had his bike with him. He rode to school. He rode to work as a dish washer at the Boston Market off I-4 and State Road 434.

"This trip is all he talked about," said Debbie Jordan, his boss and the manager at his Boston Market. "I said to a couple of the other managers we might be watching the next Lance Armstrong."

Starting out solo

When June 8 rolled around, Perezluha was ready to begin his journey.

Perezluha had his cell phone on him, and his bike had a satellite tracking device that sent new latitude and longitude coordinates every 10 minutes. His parents would keep track of him that way.

"Most parents would probably think we're crazy to do this," Carol Perezluha says. "But he's learning so

much. I really feel Steven is safer with my brother than he is traveling out here alone every day."

Perezluha rode the first day alone up through Palatka toward Georgia.

The following day, he turned 18.

His father, John, met up with him on his birthday and rode behind him the rest of the way to Pittsburgh.

They went through the Blue Ridge Mountains, through Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia until he met up with his uncle in Pittsburgh. Perezluha arrived on June 14, seven days and 1,259 miles after leaving Longwood.

But he wasn't tired. He was just getting started. He stayed in Pittsburgh for a week as he and his uncle began preparing for their long trip. Each had a bob trailer full of the essentials they needed. They had no plans to pay for lodging, and wanted to keep their food costs at \$10 a day (they only brought cash). So they packed. And packed. And packed.

They had sleeping bags, an air mattress, a three-person tent, clothes, plastic bags, tape, food, bike-repair equipment, a cooking stove, water bottles, water filter, batteries, lights, a pump, camera, journals, sunscreen, Vaseline and plenty more.

Real journey begins

They prepared to leave on Father's Day, June 21. The trailers were so heavy, John and a friend had to prop up the two bikes to make sure they didn't fall over

into the street. Undeterred, Perezluha and his uncle left at 6 a.m. It was in the low 60s.

They had problems almost immediately. The trailers were too heavy. Chew nearly crashed, so they stopped at a friend's house and unloaded about 30 pounds of gear. The following day, they made it to Erie, Pa., finding the lighter trailers much better for riding.

They rode along Lake Erie to Buffalo, past Niagara Falls (no time for pictures) and looped around to the Canadian side of the lake and into Ontario. That is where they met the first of several kind people who allowed them to camp with them. Near Toronto, Perezluha had a problem with his bike, so a man drove him to a shop for repairs.

But not everyone was so friendly in Ontario. One night, there was nowhere for the pair to set up camp. So they slept in a cemetery. The next morning, an old man chased them out, screaming at them for having the nerve to camp there. They quickly packed up their gear and left.

Soon, the insect problem started. Swarms of mosquitoes and horse flies made the ride through Canada annoying and uncomfortable. Not only did they get bitten, but they had to deal with saddle sores, which develop when riding for extended periods of time. They spent most nights camping under the stars, save for the few times strangers allowed them

to camp on their lawns or sometimes in a warm bed with a good meal, a shower and a place for laundry.

The road into Manitoba, through Saskatchewan and Alberta was actually pretty boring, nothing but prairie land, farmland and flat earth. They stayed away from major cities like Winnipeg and Edmonton, going north and south through the middle of Canada.

Perezluha expected much more than this, and the pair would often entertain themselves by creating stories and tall tales. Sometimes, Perezluha would ride off ahead of his uncle, challenging himself with 5-minute, 10-minute or even hour-long time trials. He would then circle back to find his uncle and the two would continue ahead.

As for food, they would find the cheapest goods at grocery stores: pasta, sauce, oatmeal, chips, cookies and drinks. Every night they ate pasta and every morning they ate oatmeal. They would down chips and cookies for lunch on the road.

They challenged themselves to go at least 100 miles a day, and would ride anywhere between six and 14 hours, depending on how far they needed to go. Each night, both wrote in their journals, keeping the miles, details of the day, temperature and a log of what they did from the time they woke up to the time they went to sleep.

Into Alaska

Finally, they reached the 1,400-mile Alaska Highway in Dawson Creek, British Columbia. Traffic was heavy for a stretch, but once they got going, the scenery was everything Perezluha wanted. The mountains stretched out, welcoming and glorious. Days later, they reached Summit Lake, B.C., at 4,000 feet above sea level. The highlight of the trip.

"We had beautiful, rocky mountain views," Perezluha says. "We saw lakes, streams, nice rivers, crystal clear water, rapids. It was great."

Then it was into Yukon Territory, day by day inching closer to the border with Alaska. Though they were in grizzly bear country, they only spotted a handful and never had problems when they camped.

Chew had grown a bushy beard and was riding with a wheel rim cracked in three places. They were dirty, having not had a real shower in weeks. They craved home-cooked meals and their own beds, and still had more than 5,000 miles left to ride to get back home.

But they were creeping in, and Perezluha had a GPS that allowed him to count down the miles, his wild, improbable, far-fetched idea only a few pedals away from reality.

On Thursday, Aug. 6, Perezluha and Chew saw the "Welcome to Alaska" sign. Tears welled in Perezluha's eyes. They had done it, crossing into Alaska 47 days and 5,115 miles after leaving Pittsburgh.

The nephew and the uncle got off their bikes and hugged. Perezluha had but one emotion.

"It was the best feeling on earth," he said.

The two continued into Anchorage before beginning their journey back to Florida.

They left Aug. 13 on their trusty racing bikes, their highlighted maps and zigzagging trails showing them the way back home.