

Cross-country cyclist rests in Portage

By Ron Thomson

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Cycling across Canada to help send Nicaraguan children to school, Ilan Levy rolled through Portage la Prairie on Saturday afternoon.

Levy along with seven other cyclists set up Camp at Miller's Camping Resort.

The 58-year-old executive coach and avid cyclist said he planned to cycle across Canada for his 60th birthday, but an opportunity to do it on behalf of the SchoolBOX Foundation convinced him to start his journey a few years early.

SchoolBOX is a registered Canadian Charity that helps children in Central America go to school.

For each kilometre cycled, Ilan hopes to raise money to purchase one package of educational supplies for an impoverished child in Nicaragua. Part of the funds raised will also go toward building a small school in a community called Mata de Caña in rural Nicaragua and also toward building seven additional classrooms in Nicaragua.

His cross-Canada journey combines his love of cycling, his thirst for adventure and his belief in education into a 8,000 km journey across Canada.

"I love cycling," he said. "I've been cycling all my life, but I've never done something quite this big ... I thought seeing Canada at 25 km/h would be something I would want to give myself for my 60th birthday."

The journey ended up starting a couple years early for the now 58-year-old. Last year, Levy was invited to a SchoolBOX fundraiser in his hometown, Toronto, and he met SchoolBOX president Tom Affleck. The two had a plan for Levy to bike across Canada in support of SchoolBOX in about 10 minutes.

No stranger to providing educational aid, Levy is co-founder of the Oriole Scholarship Fund, which helps fund the post-secondary educations for Canadian students with financial needs.

"My wife and I believe highly in education, so for us SchoolBOX is a great fit," he said. "We've had our own foundation for a while and we've given out over 50 scholarships to Canadians in need who wouldn't be able to go to university otherwise. This is our way of expanding that assistance beyond Canada."

Levy said it makes it easier to push himself because he's doing it for SchoolBOX.



Staff photo by Ron Thomson...Ilan Levy takes a break from his cross-Canada journey Saturday at Miller's Camping Resort.

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"I've found myself often thinking of the kids from Nicaragua," he said. "The kids I've met, the people who work there I've met. It gives you a sense of purpose."

One of the highlights on the trip so far, which is about a third complete, came just outside of Portage at the gas station at the Highway 16, Highway 1 intersection, Levy said.

"We stopped there to get something to eat," he said. "I came out and this woman said, 'Are you with the SchoolBOX guy?' I said, 'I am the SchoolBOX guy.'"

She had heard Levy on the radio and gave Levy \$10.

There have been some challenges on the journey. Levy, a self-professed city boy, said the mountains through B.C. and Alberta were difficult, especially since he'd never cycled anything like it in his 50 years of biking.

"When you're climbing through Rogers Pass or Kicking Horse Pass those are two tall mountains," he said. "That's a challenge in itself just from the riding point of view. We had the misfortune of getting bad weather, as well."

With the challenges, however, comes a sense of accomplishment when they're completed. This is another highlight, Levy said.

"Really the only way to do something like this is not just a day at a time, it's almost like minute by minute," he said. "If you think about 8,000 km it's daunting, it's just too big, so you have to break it down. We've celebrated each time zone we've gained and each province we've crossed."

The experience of seeing Canada from his bike has been fascinating for the Torontonian. He said he is getting a first-hand appreciation of how vast the country is.

"We cycle day after day after day and see very little in the way of human life," Levy said. "You see a farm, you see a ranch, you see a town at the beginning of the day and the end of the day, maybe it's not even a town, maybe it's a village or provincial park."

It's also Levy's first trip through the Prairies, which he said are far more beautiful with all the colours than he anticipated.

Levy is crossing the country as part of a tour with seven other cyclists, although, Levy is the only one doing so for charity. He is amazed how cohesive the group has become.

"I would have never believed that a group of eight people plus our two support staff could gel so quickly, could function so well together because none of us knew each other before we came here ... There are friendships I imagine will last a long time that are formed here," he said.

While not on his bike seat, Levy has been blogging about his ride and taking photos from his smartphone. To check out his blog, visit schoolboxca.wordpress.com. At the website, his progress can be checked, messages can be left and donations made.

rthomson@cpheraldleader.com