

FEATURE

Journey of awareness

By MICHELE YOUNG

Daily News Staff Reporter

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At 60, Mel Thompson is the kind of senior executive you might expect to be contemplating retirement.

He's fit, tanned and healthy, with the physique of a former long-distance runner who has climbed "a mountain or two" and who, in recent years, has turned to cycling to stay in shape.

He has four adult children between 22 and 28 years of age, and a supportive wife, Carol.

But instead of retirement — which is down the road, admittedly — Thompson is focused on his current sabbatical from his Toronto office of Xerox Canada.

He's cycling across the country to raise awareness of mental health. And, like most people who take up such endeavours, he's doing it because of his personal involvement.

His oldest daughter, Lindsay, was diagnosed as a teenager with schizoaffective disorder.

And so, on May 19, Thompson dipped his tires in the Pacific Ocean in Vancouver and began an estimated 100-day journey toward St. John's, N.L.

He arrived in Kamloops Saturday, took a much-needed day of rest on Sunday and, after a newspaper interview Monday morning, headed out on his red carbon-fibre-frame 20-speed toward Salmon Arm, 107 kilometres away.

The trip is mainly about raising awareness, but Thompson wants to create a fundraising legacy, too. So the website for his journey — www.therideformentalhealth.org — includes a section where donations can be made to local mental-health organizations.

Like the Canadian Mental Health Association in Kamloops.

Executive director Doug Sage accompanied the Thompsons on their interview. While money is nice, awareness is more important in his view.

"There's never enough awareness," said Sage.

Teenagers in particular are vulnerable where mental health is concerned because they so desperately want to fit in and don't want to be different from their peers.

That's what's so compelling about Lindsay's story, he said.

"We need more brave people like Lindsay who will talk to people and put a face on it," he said.

Lindsay was in her teens when the girl, who was an excellent student, writer and artist, began sleeping for long periods, acting out, withdrawing and displaying what her parents assumed, naturally, was typical teenage behaviour.

But by the time she was 17, she herself had realized something was wrong. Her parents did, too.

"It was a difficult, tumultuous time," said Carol. "There were signs we didn't realize."

With the diagnosis, the pieces fell into place. But it was still a long stretch and navigation of a systemic maze to get Lindsay the right resources.

Eleven years later, Lindsay is travelling with her parents, cycling and speaking when she can.

She got up to the podium in Vancouver, but it was down to the last minute before she decided whether she'd be able to do it. She had two speeches; a long version and a short one.

Shaking, she gave the long one and got two ovations for sharing her story.

Besides accompanying her parents on the tour, she volunteers. But she'd love to work, if only there wasn't so much difficulty finding somewhere where she could be accepted.

"I'd like to see more awareness in the workplace, so people with mental illness have a place to go; a place where they can contribute," she said.

Her dad pointed out that despite the prevalence of mental illness — it affects at least one in five Canadians at some point in their lives — there is still a lot of stigma attached.

"We see it as two types of stigma. The individual, afraid of how people will react, and the other is how people will judge you," he said.

Beyond the awareness the family and their supporters hope this cross-country trip will bring, the Thompsons plan on creating a foundation aimed at raising mental health awareness.

A comment Sage made was one the Thompsons said they'll borrow in the future: "Friend-raising is more important than fundraising."