

Montanan rides around the world as hunger advocate; first stop Whitefish

By MATT BALDWIN *Whitefish Pilot*



Chris Sorbi on the 1982 Suzuki motorcycle he will ride around the world. He stopped in Whitefish recently. Matt Baldwin / *Whitefish Pilot*

Chris Sorbi has embarked on the ride of his life.

The 27-year-old Iranian born U.S. citizen from Helena is on a mission to take his 1982 Suzuki motorcycle around the world — visiting every country and every habitable continent along the way — in the name of world hunger. His first stop on the Transcontinental Humanitarian Expedition was Whitefish.

Sorbi motored into town on Aug. 17 to meet with Pam Gerwe and Mike Jopek at Purple Frog Gardens, a small vegetable farm on Blanchard Lake Drive. Gerwe was intrigued to meet Sorbi after reading an article about his ambitious adventure. The two sat down with other workers at the farm's common house on Aug. 16, and over a "hearty dinner of vegetables from the garden," discussed ways to stamp out hunger.

While both agree it is a "fixable" issue, Gerwe encouraged Sorbi not to overlook the farmer's role in solving the problem while on his expedition. "I want him to meet with farmers on his trip," she said. "As a food producer, I think we are on the frontline to protect the world from hunger." She said Sorbi could get a different perspective of the issue by talking with the people who are growing the world's food.

According to Gerwe, most people want to provide for themselves and that although feeding programs are good, they can only go so far. "We need to be giving people the tools and knowledge to raise food for their own family," she said. She pointed out that Purple Frog

Gardens — although small in the grand scheme of food production — provides food for a lot of people.

Sorbi agreed that sustainability in Montana can go a long way in the fight against hunger issues locally. "We are sending our local beef away to be processed," he said. "Only to have it shipped back to Montana, and we end up paying twice as much."

Gerwe also wanted to make sure Sorbi was aware of World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms. Farmers involved with WWOOF offer food and accommodation to volunteers in exchange for work on their farm. Gerwe said the program would help educate Sorbi about different farming techniques and allow him the opportunity to eat and sleep for free on his trip. The motivation for Sorbi's trip around the world is seeded in his childhood. Sorbi grew up surrounded by war.

As an adolescent in Iran during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, he witnessed things children should never see — destruction, violence, rampant disease and starvation.

It is estimated that somewhere around 1 million casualties occurred in the eight-year war. Both countries were left financially devastated after a ceasefire in 1988.

At 17 years old, Sorbi found salvation from a war-torn Iran when he immigrated to the United States with his family — a country he calls the true land of opportunity. Four years ago he decided to move from his home in North Carolina to Alaska, but his car broke down in Townsend and he settled on Helena as a final destination.

Sorbi prospered in the Capital City, working as a UPS driver and enjoying the grand landscape of Big Sky Country — but couldn't shake the feeling that he could be doing more with his life. He wanted to give something back to society for the opportunities he's found since his youth. "HUNGER is something that is fixable," Sorbi said. "I can't cure AIDS or heart disease, but I can fundraise and I can lobby. I can give people the tools they need to feed themselves."

Sorbi, like Gerwe, says education is paramount in the effort to solve an issue as immense as the world food crisis. "Here, we don't have a chronic problem with hunger," Sorbi said. "Most places, they don't have the tools [for farming], they don't have anything. First we need to feed them, address the hunger to begin with, then educate them and make it sustainable."

Sorbi will be raising money for the cause through slideshow presentations at libraries and other public facilities. "In North America, I'm mostly doing fundraising," he said. "As soon as I get to the places that I can spend the money, I'll spend it." He says Africa and North Korea will be two places he can have the most impact, but they will also be the most dangerous.

"North Africa will be the hardest to visit," he said. "Those are the places I'm staying the longest, too. The poorer the place, the more dangerous it will be for me, but the longer I'm going to stay." Sorbi's motorcycle is a heavily modified Suzuki GS850 fit with aluminum panniers on the back to store his equipment.

He has packed only the essentials for the trip — tent, sleeping bag, stove, bike tools and a small solar panel to power the laptop he will be blogging from. He sold all of his other physical possessions to fund the trip. His planned route around the world will take him from 66 degrees north to 66 degrees south. He will cross the Atlantic Ocean from the southern tip of South America by hitching a ride on a sailboat in exchange for work as a deckhand.

Sorbi motored out of Whitefish on Monday, headed for Glacier Park then Edmonton and eventually the Arctic Ocean. According to his blog, he got his bike stuck in the mud near Hungry Horse Reservoir, but two individuals helped him push it back to dry pavement.

Sorbi encourages anyone with ideas about where he can stay on his trip to contact him through his Web site, www.motorcyclememoir.com.