

## Courage and a touch of madness.

When I was about ten years of age, I made a decision that would impact on my life forever and influence the lives of thousands of people all over the world. Of course, I did not know the ramifications at the time.

One Friday night, Ernie Pearse, who at that stage was the South African champion marathon canoeist, and I were at a Natal Canoe Club meeting in Pietermaritzburg. The chairman, Vic Gray, asked everyone present to stand and bow our heads in a minute of silence for two fellow canoeists who had just lost their lives on the Tugela River.

I did not know who they were, but while the other club members were busy paying their respects, I set myself a goal to become the first person to canoe the Tugela and live. I just could not see the point of being a dead hero. That night when I got home, I couldn't wait to tell my father what I had decided to do one day when I was big. He simply put his hand on my head and said, "it's time for bed." Looking back that was a typical response from my father.

The next day I couldn't wait to get to school and tell my friends what I had decided to do. They laughed and started calling me Tugela Boy. That just made me mad! I'd show them.

Eight years later while at work at the South African Railways Travel Bureau I received a phone call from Robby Stewart of the Kingfisher Canoe club in Durban. "Tugela Boy, I just thought you would like to know that we are canoeing the Tugela in April. Kiss goodbye to your dream." (I loved the rivalry between us.) I put the phone down, got up, walked through to my boss, Jack Goodwin's office and asked for immediate leave. He laughed and said no. "Then I'll take unpaid leave", I replied. "No you won't, by the way why do you want the leave?" When I told him, he pushed his chair back and laughed. "Forget it, you'll get killed and then it will be my fault for letting you go." I laughed, looked him straight in the eyes and quit. I simply walked out and never even went back for my wages. Now I was a young man on a mission!

I went back to the Y.M.C.A. where I was living, took out my long ticky (A long ticky was a piece of wire that you could use, if you knew how, to make the phone box think that you had paid for the phone call) and started phoning every canoeist that I thought would like to become a hero with me on the Tugela. No takers - they all laughed. "You'll get killed", was the standard reply.

By supertime I knew I had to make a different plan. I sat down to eat next to a crazy fool called Fox Ledebour (He was crazy. As a schoolboy he used to lower his little sister over the edge of a cliff in the Drakensberg to steal eagles' eggs for his egg collection). By the end of supper, I had a partner. The next day he resigned from his job. A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do! In a week we had built a Canadian canoe, it was the only type of canoe that would be able to carry all the equipment that we would need, had arranged all the permits to canoe through the 'native reserves' as they were known in those days. All was ready, except we had no way to get ourselves, the canoe and all the equipment from Pietermaritzburg to the Drakensberg to start the trip. None of our friends who had cars, (and they were in short supply), wanted to be part of what they considered to be our suicide mission. Eventually I got my sister's boyfriend to agree to help us - much to my sister's disgust! My parents had told me I couldn't go and Fox had conveniently forgotten to tell his parents. So what, we were going anyway.

Incidentally Fox was not a canoeist. Neither of us had ever canoed in a Canadian canoe with a single bladed paddle before. The only time we put the canoe in the water prior to the event was in the fishpond at the "Y" to work out how best to pack it. WE MUST HAVE BEEN CRAZY! The only thing we

knew for sure was that nothing was going to stop us! The night before we left, we took the story to the newspaper, knowing that when the story broke, we would already be halfway to the mountains.

Near Bergville Janet, (my sister), turned to me and said in a very quiet voice," Dave you are going to get killed on this river" I just smiled, then to my amazement I heard a voice from deep down inside me saying "I'd rather die on the river than live on the riverbank and watch someone else make my dream come true. Don't worry we'll be fine. Dead I'll prove to the world that their judgement of me is correct, alive, I will prove myself to myself."

It took the month of March in 1965, but we did it and became the first people to ever canoe the Tugela from the Mountains to the sea and live. Fox went on to become manager of one of the Springbok canoeing teams and I have ended up travelling the world teaching people that he who attempts the impossible has little competition, and that the Universe will always come to the aid of a person with a great plan who is prepared to commit his all to his dream!

There is greatness deep-down inside us all. Life is the process of learning to let it out!

David Pickard Wyllie