

Pedaling Against Poverty to raise funds for impoverished women

By **EAMONN MAHER**
Staff Writer

There's a massive willow tree on an S-bend along 15 Sideroad just west of Trafalgar Rd. that causes most motorists to do a double-take.

Hanging from the tree on the front lawn of Vince Vetro's home are literally dozens of donated bicycles and he's been adding to the collection over the past couple of months.

The Bike Tree has taken on a life of its own, said Vetro, with strangers pulling over to the side of the road to drop off more bicycles on the lawn.

That sort of generosity is what fuels The Lending Journey, a faith-based organization that Vetro founded in 2003, and what has driven him to embark on a 500-km fundraising bike ride from one side of the Central American country of Nicaragua to the other in November.

Pedaling Against Poverty is the name of the campaign and the goal is to raise \$100,000 for The Lending Journey, a micro-financing model that provides loans averaging \$300 each to women in impoverished countries in order for them to start up, expand or maintain a business.

"We wondered how we could build a fundraiser out of some sort of adventure. I've spent the last 15 years traveling around the world and I've been told I derive my energy from experience, so we'd have to do something that was experience-driven," said Vetro, 52.

"Bicycles are the most popular form of transportation in countries like Nicaragua, so I get to mix my passion for cycling with philanthropy. We want it to be representative of the unbelievable challenges these women face every day, so we're riding from Costa Rica to Honduras, which is like 7,000 feet uphill, with transport trucks whizzing by you."

Vetro won't be riding alone. He'll bring a team from Canada, including "cycle technologist" Stefan Vanne of Georgetown, two support vehicles, translators, a TV documentary crew and logistics people on the ground in Nicaragua. The route was mapped out this past November and Vetro has been training three to four times a week on local-area roads for the trip.

He often encounters dangerous situations in his travels—surviving a plane crash into the side of a mountain in Indonesia; getting lost in the Amazon jungle—and when in countries like Nicaragua, makes

sure he's back in his hotel before nightfall.

"We're going to be riding for six to seven hours a day for eight days and I might have bitten off more than I can chew, but there's nowhere better to train for something like that than in Halton Hills," he said.

"Why Nicaragua? When we started The Lending Journey in Ecuador in 2003, we were told that it was a desperate situation there. It's the second-poorest country in Latin America next to Haiti and it's located on five tectonic plates, so it's a place that's always in turmoil with the political strife and everything else going on. We really wanted to make inroads there and we opened our first office in 2010. I'm there three or four times a year now, but there's still no trust factor with the government agencies down there."

Vetro, who last year sold his Ontario-based general maintenance firm in order to devote more time to The Lending Journey, grew up in Toronto with four brothers and parents who took in many foster children—some for just a day, others a week or for many years.

The repayment rate for the micro-finance loans by Lending Journey clients is about 80 per cent, which Vetro says is "amazing" considering the living conditions some must endure. Restaurants and Avon sales representatives are the most popular businesses that receive loans,

but the money provided is actually secondary to developing entrepreneurial skills and self-confidence.

"It's because of my upbringing, where I grew up in a world of experiencing injustice," added Vetro.

"If you give a person a fish, you feed them for the day. If you teach them how to fish, you feed them for a lifetime, and that's all good, but unless you sit down and eat the fish with them, you don't really know their lives. We're not a bank. As a micro-finance organization, we're deeply involved with the lives of people we work with. Raising the money is the easy part. You get emotionally invested and then someone gets beaten up or even murdered. Ten generations of poverty isn't going to be flipped around overnight."

Pedaling Against Poverty has received a lot of support locally, including from Mike Huggins of Circus Marketing, fundraising by Carla Winter and additional funds from Halton Hills Christian School and Silver Creek Public School.

For more info visit the website www.thelendingjourney.com

The Lending Journey will host its annual Hearts Open fundraising golf tournament on Friday, Sept. 12 at the Hornby Glen course, with former Toronto Argonauts' head coach Bob O'Billovich serving as the dinner guest speaker. Info: www.thelendingjourney.com

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