

PORTSMOUTH ATLANTIC NEWS

PORTSMOUTH | NEWINGTON | NEW CASTLE



Fundraising 'accordion warrior' swims to Shoals

By MARK CHAG JR.

ATLANTIC NEWS STAFF WRITER

SEACOAST | There's a lot of water between the mainland and the Isles of Shoals, but one local man traversed it all.

On the morning of Thursday, Jan. 17, Kittery's Gary Sredzienski leaped into the chilly Atlantic waters, and started kicking toward the east.

Four hours and 25 minutes later, he touched shore — roughly nine miles out at sea, at the rocky outpost we call Appledore Island.

"I wanted to pull a joke on everyone. I waited until I was only 25 feet offshore, I said to everyone, 'I quit, I quit, I can't make it!'" Gary recalls of the end of the swim. "You should have seen all the faces on the two boats — the look of shock, the size of their eyes enlarging. Then, I immediately said, 'Just kidding!'"

With that, he swam the final leg of the journey, and laid his hands on the rocky shore, and hopped on a boat for the ride back home.

The popular accordionist and musical talent — who performs across New England with his band, "The Serfs" — frequents the winter waters in his wet suit and swims the estuaries and waterways for fun.

But this was no recreational swim; Gary took on the feat for a good cause. He accepted pledges for the task, which were donated to the Kremfels Foundation in Portsmouth, a non-profit organization that helps folks recover from debilitating brain injuries.

"The donations continue to come in and we have now received almost \$8,000," says Paula Foster-Ventura, administrative assistant at the Kremfels Foundation. "Gary just feels great about what he did. This story has been so inspirational to so many. Here at the foundation, we

felt such a great team spirit at work. From the boats out at sea to the people behind the scenes and the supporters that showed up on a very cold winter morning to help us cheer Gary on in his mission. It all came together so unbelievably well and we couldn't have done it without all the help."

A group of fans gathered on the shore to see Gary off, and a pair of boats rode alongside to keep a safe eye on him as he swam.

Although the day was ultimately a success, it got off to a bumpy start which nearly scrapped the mission before it began.

"My assistant, Kent Allyn, called and said he was on his way to pick me up at 7 a.m. So I put on my exterior suit and the biggest of all nightmares happened, the zipper broke off the suit! I used a spare, but it was a real terror," Gary recalls. "It ended up that I didn't get out at the Seacoast Science Center because at that point in the tide, around three hours after high tide, the waters near that point were getting rough and possibly treacherous so I left right at the mouth of Portsmouth Harbor, just before the point at Odiorne."

But what is it like to swim all the way from the mainland to the Shoals? As one might expect, it's a challenge.

"At times, the waves were a bit tough, and it was true about a north-south current that I had to fight toward the islands. I had to follow a boat which was fixed by a global positioning system at a point on the island," he says. "I have to say it was a very enjoyable swim. The waves were so tough at times, that I couldn't see my escort boats, but I just backed off on my 'throttle' to conserve energy and went with the flow."

From all the years of swimming, adds Gary, "I have learned that the most



important thing in open water swimming is to just relax and enjoy the conditions no matter how harsh they can be. You can't fight those water conditions; you must adapt to it."

Waves and tides weren't the only obstacle Gary encountered — there was also the little matter of a transport tanker.

"The tanker on the horizon sure got a lot closer as I swam out, but it turned in our direction. Wow! To feel like such a speck of dust, it's very humbling," he says.

Having dodged the tanker, and continued on, there was just the lonely monotony of pursuing forward, hour after hour.

"I just had pleasant thoughts dwell in my mind the whole time. I got a little weak around a mile from the islands, but they fed me a half of banana and it was so amazing how the strength all came back to my muscles," he says. "I was amazed how quickly it happened. I felt like the energizer bunny rabbit after I took those few bites. I guess I may have drained the potassium from my muscles."

He saw seals pop their heads above the water, and fish through the icy slush which formed in his goggles — and the beautiful glory of nature above.

"The sky was amazing with the sun in and out. How small and insignificant we are out there. I can't express the joy of this all," he says. "Some people are so happy to win the lottery, a new car — I hit my own lottery and my own joy, and did some good for others in the process."

While a group of people had gathered earlier in the day to see Gary off, it was another assortment who welcomed him back.

"I'll never forget the five or six seals waiting on the rocks, off the 103 Kittery Point Bridge, as we came home. To me, I couldn't have asked for a better welcoming committee," he says.

Despite his tremendous efforts, and the countless patients who will ultimately be aided at the Kremfels Foundation, there was one, Gary jokes, who wasn't so pleased about his swim.

"What cracks me up is that I can't believe how mad

my cat was at me when I returned home," he jokes. "It's as if I were out on the town being selfish having a good time for myself."

He adds, "My entire crew was so outstanding and I can't emphasize enough how we were and are a team. It wouldn't have been possible if it weren't for each and everyone one of those individuals."

But what about next year?

Foster-Ventura rode on the boat that brought Gary home from the Shoals after the swim.

"He told me, 'It's the smartest thing I've ever done. It makes life special,'" Foster-Ventura recalls of the trip.

"I then asked him if he will do this again for us and he indicated it was highly likely."

To learn more about the Kremfels Foundation and their ongoing efforts to help people who have suffered brain injuries, visit the official Web site at www.kremfelsfoundation.org. For more information about Gary, his music, and his life in the water, visit www.garysred.com.