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Extreme fundraisers take charity to the limit

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By Verna Gates

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama (Reuters) - Forget extreme sports. If you want people to really applaud while you take your favorite leisure pursuit to the limit, try extreme fund-raising.

Just a decade ago, the riskiest thing people would do to raise money for charity might have involved pulling hot cookies from an oven.

These days compassion fatigue has forced fund-raisers to drive themselves to increasingly outlandish deeds -- climbing the world's highest mountains, motorcycling at breakneck speed across continents, or jumping out of airplanes.

For those seeking a guilt-free way to indulge pastimes and experience a hint of danger, the challenge has become an opportunity.

"There are no frontiers left. So people are exploring the internal frontier -- their own fears," said fund-raising coach Marc Pitman of a phenomenon he said emerged in Britain around a decade ago.

The founder of eFundraising.com, Eric Boyko, lost two fingers on Argentina's Aconcagua Mountain while raising \$100,000 for the Montreal Alzheimer's Society. Undeterred, he and three friends repeated the challenge on Denali in Alaska in 2006 and aim for Everest in 2008.

"We are risking our lives, our fingers and our toes, but it is easier to raise money that way," said Boyko, 36.

Jamie Baker got heat blisters last summer running across 20 feet of fire to raise 5,000 pounds (\$10,000) for rescued badgers and hedgehogs at the Secret World Wildlife Refuge in Highbridge, England.

"You don't dawdle," he said of the experience.

Of the \$260 billion in donations raised in the United States last year, less than 1 percent came through extreme fund-raising, said Michael Nilsen, spokesman for the Association of Fund-raising Professionals.

But adherents say the aim is not just to raise money. Extreme stunts also raise awareness.

"There is so much noise out there, you have to make a big splash to get attention," said Texas fund-raising coach Sandra Sims.

SKATEBOARDING ACROSS CANADA

In 2006, Benjamin Jordan and three friends skateboarded across Canada to raise C\$65,000 (\$59,000) for the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation. Fund-raising was the perfect excuse for a guilt-free adventure.

"It seemed a bit selfish to spend five months skateboarding. But it didn't seem so useless when we could make money for a cause: the health of the women we love," said Jordan, 26, of Vancouver, Canada.

The same cause became personal for Matt McClone of Appleton, Wisconsin,

when his girlfriend's mother was diagnosed with cancer in 2005. Doing something active allowed him to be supportive.

One day and 100 skydiving jumps later, he had raised \$20,000 for breast cancer research.

"Working on it distracted me from worrying. It was one of the most poignant moments of my life," said McClone, 28.

LITTLE FEET

At moments of personal crisis, men often want to do something active to alleviate a sense of helplessness, said Pitman.

Dale Folwell searched for nearly eight years for a way to honor his seven-year-old son, Dalton, killed by a driver who failed to stop for a school bus. The two often rode on Folwell's motorcycle and frequented the motorcycle shop.

Last October, he set the world record for extreme motorcycle riding.

He covered nearly 33,000 miles in 30 days and in 48 U.S. states and raised \$300,000 for a new organ transplant center to be named for his son who was an organ donor.

Folwell was on his bike for 18 hours a day and exhaustion often forced him to halt. His legs atrophied beneath him and his body temperature dropped substantially, chilling him even through the heat of Death Valley.

But he said the sensation of two little feet in his back spurred him on.

"Like any child, Dalton would kick the back of Dad's seat. At first I thought it was my imagination but I think it was my son inspiring me to keep going," said Folwell, a North Carolina State legislator from Winston-Salem.

At 48, Folwell is at the upper age limit of the extreme fund-raising crowd.

Many extreme fund-raisers face obvious physical risks and less obvious mental ones but almost all say their public motivation of raising money is tinged with a less obvious quest for personal satisfaction.

"It is the most human thing I have ever done. You forget how grateful you are for your life until you get close to losing it," said skateboarder Jordan, who feared riding down big mountains on four small wheels.

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