By rowboat, bike, climbing rope, Mountaineer follows his dream around the world

By Brad Stracener

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Friend and mentor, the late Goran Kropp (right), helped inspire Erden Eruc, shown with Kropp above on a trip in Ouray, Colo.

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His human-powered trek across the globe, which officially started by biking from here to Mt. Denali and reaching its summit in 2003, “is not any different than an astronaut’s in dark space who takes weeks to get to where he is going.” For Erden, the journey may take seven years; he “will just be in a different medium.”

His dream started when he was young, the native-born Turk says. When he was a freshman in high school he saw a National Geographic from 1963 and read about the Everest expedition which took the first American to its summit. “I came across a word I had never seen before – bivouac – and I had to look it up.”

He said from that moment on, “this is what I wanted to do.” But he is actually doing more than climbing Everest. He will bike and row to get there. And he is even doing more than that. By the largess of technology, he is taking along anyone who wants to join him, whether in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean or on the highest peak in West New Guinea.

Via satellite phone and computers he plans to make himself a rowing, pedaling, climbing classroom for any student at any school who wishes to log onto his journey year in and year out of each grade level. It will not be like reading about Columbus or other history, says Erden, a Mountaineers member. They will be sharing in the history, traveling with it – “engaged,” as Erden puts it. A student can be a part of the grunts, the tears, the smiles and the gut checks which will confound, fuel and bemuse Erden along every mile. As they learn, in what he calls “a teachable moment,” he will be learning, too. He will be learning about the human spirit that lives inside of him. He will be learning about rowing, about people around him and about nature itself. Ultimately though, he wants to be able to “wow” students with his journey and persuade them to “dare to dream and make sure you guard that dream.”

Erden has had to guard his plan on a number of occasions. He received snubs from many a solicited sponsor. Others shook their heads and rolled their eyes when he shared his plans, and then 9/11 occurred. “Sept. 11 killed my original idea. I said to myself, maybe I’ll have to sleep on this.”

But his sense of duty, “having the courage to accept the challenge,” and taking the torch from a friend and mentor, the late Goran Kropp (right), helped inspire Erden Eruc.

On the highest peak in West New Guinea, Erden along every mile. As they learn, in what he calls “a teachable moment,” he will be learning, too. He will be learning about the human spirit that lives inside of him. He will be learning about rowing, about people around him and about nature itself. Ultimately though, he wants to be able to “wow” students with his journey and persuade them to “dare to dream and make sure you guard that dream.”

Erden Eruc photo
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good friend and mentor who died strengthened his will to guard his dream from any foe, 9/11 or other. That good friend, Göran Kropp, had planned to kayak and climb with Erden, but a fall from the Sun- shine Wall near Frenchman Coulee in September of 2002 dashed those plans. Erden was climbing with his friend and inspiration at the time he fell to his death. “That tragic loss shook me to my founda- tion, becoming the swift kick that I needed to start my life journey.”

Kropp bicycled to Everest, climbed it and bicycled back to his home in Sweden in 1996. Erden met Kropp in 2001 at one of the latter’s shows in Seattle. Erden said after myriad rejections by sponsors and the crazy looks from others, Göran Kropp helped to reinforce this notion that issues were not aboutErden’s ability to reach his goals.

“When will you start?” Erden remembers Göran asking him and then, “Maybe we can kayak the Siberian shores together . . .” Erden said he soon knew he had “found a kindred spirit” in Göran. He learned from his talks with Göran and others who have succeeded at human-powered feats that experience is overrated. “The most important thing is commitment, the commitment to a plan and not to quit. To get up the next day and go at it again,” stated Erden, sporting shortly cropped hair and a beard on the heavier side of a five-o’clock shadow. His bicycling to Denali and back helped to reinforce this notion.

“When I was fighting hills in the Fraser River Canyon, I hated it. I couldn’t get into a cadence on the bike. I would work up a terrible sweat going up each hill and then freeze from (being damp) as I went down the other side. All the while I saw this river down below just flowing level.”

At one point on that late winter day, he simply quit, set up camp alongside the road and ate an energy bar for dinner. “I woke up the next morning, looked at the next hill and it all seemed different. I told myself I can’t fight these hills. Either ac- cept them or stop complaining.”

He believes this acceptance comes about a third of the way into a jour- ney, when one stops resenting the pain and the challenge.

“I learned in Alaska that this is a journey of change, and change happens when there is accep- tance.” That acceptance comes from the melding of mind and body, he explained, so that the cold, the pain and the weariness do not serve to make one abandon his or her commitment to the task. “When the mind joins the body this way, it makes for one beautiful, powerful engine.”

Erden, broad shouldered and stocky, looks at himself as an en- gine that will be scaling peaks and rowing great oceans, but an engine that can’t fight nature. He must flow with it. “Once I am part of the ele- ments, continuing on is not hard.”

Never mind that the Pacific stretch- es for thousands of miles from South America to Irian Jaya (West ern New Guinea). Never mind that Everest is 29,900 feet into the thinnest of earthbound air and that Carstenz Pyramid is a limestone face 5,000 meters high that is often as dry as a wall in a car wash. Never mind the entire breadth of the Atlantic Ocean. Those are chal- lenges, says Erden, but the biggest challenge is mental.

Much of his commitment to the task is traceable to the legacy that Kropp left after he died. Kropp had been challenging his mind and body on trips such as Everest to help raise funds for a school in Nepal – the Göran Kropp Bishwa Darshan Primary School in Taptin, Chyangba, Solukhumbu.

Erden talked about picking up where Kropp left off in that regard. “The school is the chari- table goal,” he said of his Around- n-Over journey. The effort to keep the school running for 165 students and eight teachers was stalled by Göran’s death. Erden relayed that issues such as power, water and health care for the school will require project management. He hopes to be able to visit the school when he gets to Nepal. But first, he must land his rowboat in either Ecuador or Peru, bicycle roundtrip to climb Aconcagua, then launch from there to row across the Pacific to Irian Jaya and Carstenz. It will then be landfall in India on the way to Everest and back in the boat to Africa where Mt. Kilimanjaro awaits him. His sixth and final summit will be Europe’s Mt. Elbruz. The circumnavigation will be complete when he rows across the Atlantic to the U.S.

The physical and psychological trials on such a trek, as well as the sheer logistics, are enough to daunt one’s commitment to the plan. Erden, however, must face quite different challenges when he lands at places such as Irian Jaya. For one, he must communicate.

There are some 250 dialects of lan- guage on the island and a cannibal culture still exists there. Natives of the land have been forced from their forest homes by mining, log- ging and other resource extraction over the years that is supported and promoted by the government. In short, the social climate may be an unpredictable one for any visitor.

Climbing the slick rock of Carstenz Pyramid is just one of the foremost challenges on his mind when think- ing of Irian Jaya. He must sit down and talk to the tribal leaders when he has to discuss where to store his boat, then find his way through tropical ravines to the base of the mountain across tribal lands. Can- not, he says, he hasn’t begun to tackle that part of the plan in detail yet.

Originally, he planned only to bike and row his way across the world. However, when Kropp died, he changed his objectives to include the Six Summits Project as a trib- ute to his friend and a fund-raiser for the school.

Marmot also supported in-kind. For Erden, this is how one must accomplish his or her dream. There must be incorruptible commit- ment to it. But at the end of his vision, when he returns by bicycle to Seattle seven years from now, he will still be what he knows he was when he left, “just an ordinary person doing an out-of-the-ordinary thing.” As a result, he hopes kids around the world, a school in Nepal and he will be the better for it.

For more about Erden’s journey, visit www.around-n-over.org.

Brad Stracener is managing editor of The Mountaineer.