



From left, Charlie Fox, Jan Nilsson and Gerry Owen will bike from Nanaimo to Newfoundland, in an effort to raise awareness about the plight facing those suffering from mental health problems in Canada.

Trio will pedal for mental health

By **MARTHA TROPEA**
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For as long as he can remember, Jan Nilsson has either biked, walked, ran or even skipped to work. As a strong believer in the environment and keeping fit, it was easy for him to stay motivated. Now, a nationwide problem close to his heart has motivated the 62-year-old to go one step further – or rather, 7,500 kilometres further.

Nilsson, along with pals Gerry Owen, 57, and Charlie Fox, 70, hope to raise awareness about the relationship between mental health sufferers and homelessness in a cross-Canada trek called Ride into Light.

The trio will leave Nanaimo May 1 and pedal into St. John's, Nfld. in early August.

As they ride into cities along the way, they'll raise awareness about the issue and hear stories from mental health sufferers.

The idea of the three and a half month journey stemmed from a casual conversation and later ballooned into a highly detailed plan involving daily heart-pumping exercises, training sessions and fundraising.

"It's going to be tough. We know that," said Fox, the eldest of the group.

Fox will turn 71 during the trip and says he's falling on his back in marathons to help him to the finish line.

As a retired British Columbia probation officer, Fox has seen countless mental health sufferers.

He said a lack of services is forcing these people onto city streets everywhere.

"They used to warehouse people in big institutions. That didn't work very well," Fox said. Once institutions started to close down there was nowhere for people to go so they ended up on the streets, he added.

A 2002 Health Canada report states all Canadians are likely to encounter mental illness at some point, either through illness in a family member, friend, colleague, or in their own circumstances.

One in six Canadians will experience mental illness at some time in their lives but behind these numbers are countless individuals and families who struggle with mental illness, said Carolyn Isles, who is helping organize the trip.

The trio is asking for those wishing to support their cause to log onto hopelutherannanaimo.org and click on Ride into Light or call Nilsson at 756-3927.

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