

Norfolk man paddles 1,800 miles from Florida Panhandle
By NICOLE MORGAN, The Virginian-Pilot
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NORFOLK — It was a muscle-cramping, adrenaline-pumping journey: about 1.4 million paddle strokes and 1,800 miles.

“Kayak” Kevin Whitley, 34, began his trip in Big Lagoon State Park in Pensacola, Fla., on May 2. He paddled on through the mosquito-infested Everglades, to Key Largo, Fla., past Miami’s skyscrapers, and up much of the country’s south-Atlantic coast back to Norfolk, his hometown, on Sunday.

Best friend Ric Burnley met up with Whitley at 9 a.m. Saturday in West Neck Creek in Virginia Beach. Burnley said he helped his friend make it through shallow water littered with logs and downed trees.

That night, Burnley went home and Whitley stayed with a friend.

At about 7 a.m. Sunday, they paddled through the Chesapeake Bay with heavy winds.

Later Sunday, three more guys in kayaks caught up with them and paddled the last mile toward a dozen family members and friends waiting at a marina just off Little Creek near Shore Drive. They cheered him on.

His mother, Sonya Anthony, jumped up and down.

She was the one who, four months ago, drove him from Norfolk to Pensacola in an old Oldsmobile Delta 88 with his neon green, 16-foot Ocean Kayak Manta named “Livin the Dream” strapped to the roof. Sunday, she said she hadn’t worried a bit.

But, Burnley said, “Of course, she worried the whole time Kevin was gone.”

With good reason.

Around the coast of Florida, Whitley said he could hear the fishing rods, which were affixed upright on the rear of his kayak, sizzling during thunderstorms.

“Lightning in Florida is out of control,” he said.

“I never heard that before,” he said, recreating the buzzing sound with his mouth and making a darting hand motion.

When he wasn’t dodging lightning bolts, Whitley was battling waves, which he said gushed 4 feet high at times but never grew so rough that he lost control.

He usually paddled 15 to 20 miles a day for six to eight hours. The rest of the time, he said, he spent fishing or camping on whatever beach he chose for a night's rest.

He used maps, charts to show water depth, an atlas and a compass to find his way. For fun, he listened to his shower radio that he kept with him in the boat.

He stored a lot of other survival tools in the shallow belly of his kayak: 10 gallons of water, two weeks' worth of food, a few fish he caught, canned meat and Pop-Tarts .

"I can put a Pop-Tart right on my lap and eat it while I'm goin,'" he said.

He also had a sleeping mat, two blankets and two pillows.

He washed his clothes and showered at various marinas. And, let's just say, while kayaking, a bathroom was always at his side.

This was Whitley's third tour. His first was 500 miles from Georgia to Norfolk. "That wasn't long enough," he said. The second was from Oregon Inlet, N.C., to Ocean City, Md., a practice for his third trip.

Whitley plans to get a tattoo on his right arm of a green, square channel marker with two paddles behind it and the words "Fla. '05" to celebrate his latest adventure.

"I just love touring," Whitley said. "I love being somewhere new every day."

Most of his trip, which cost about \$4,000, was paid for by his dad, Kenneth Whitley , a former football and wrestling coach at Norview and Lake Taylor high schools.

"I hope it's a loan," Kenneth Whitley said as he watched his son catching up with friends.

He also said he was jealous. He wanted to go, too, but couldn't because of an earlier hip surgery. After hearing that, the younger Whitley said, "I wish I had started this 10 years earlier," so they could have made a memory neither would forget.

Kenneth Whitley said his son got the kayak bug on family canoeing and whitewater rafting trips that started when his son was 2.

The whole family is used to chasing adventure. Dad bicycled across America. Mom competes in marathons. And Kevin Whitley is already planning for a trip next year.

"I want to do a kayak fishing tour of the Keys," he said looking out on the water. "This time," he said, "with people."

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