



KM Little Theatre opens "The Dining Room" Friday night - **6A**

Kings Mountain

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HOMEFRONT

13th Relay for Life kicks off Friday 13th

Everyone's reason to Relay for Life is as unique as their own personal story of cancer.

Kings Mountain's annual Relay for Life for the benefit of the American Cancer Society kicks off Friday at 6 p.m. at the Kings Mountain Walking Track. It's the city's 13th annual event and this year, organizers are hoping that having the 13th on the 13th will bring them a little extra luck, albeit Friday the 13th.

Soldier treks country for veterans



Troy Yocum, left, Army veteran of the Iraq War, walks with fellow veterans SFC Castle, right, and Army veteran of Desert Storm Michael Mills. Not pictured, Marti Mongiello Navy veteran and innkeeper walks with the soldiers.

EMILY WEAVER
 Editor

On April 17, 2010, Army veteran Troy Yocum stepped off from the Louisville Slugger Museum in Louisville, Ky., on a nearly 7,800-mile walk across America. He walks for the love of his fellow soldiers, raising money for veterans along the way.

On Tuesday, he stepped into Grover on his way to Charlotte, Raleigh, and Washington, D.C. He plans to go as far north as Boston before turning around and heading back to the museum where he started...and where he'll stop.

His journey has taken him through mountain ranges, long deserts, in small towns and big cities, and even "down the aisle".

"I proposed (to her) at

mile 100. We got married at mile 256. And yesterday (May 2) we had our first wedding anniversary at mile 5,400," he said, with the smile of a newly wed.

His wife, Mareike Yocum, giggled.

She has been with him, literally, almost every step of the way. Until Mareike, of Germany, could get her green card and driver's license, she walked with him — nearly 4,000 miles. Now, she drives their support vehicle, a Hummer wrapped in the logo of "Wish Upon a Hero" (a charitable organization that is sponsoring the journey).

Joining the cross-country newlyweds are their two dogs — "Emmie the Super Dog", a Shiba Inu who has walked over 2,400 miles,

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SOLDIER: walks across America to raise money for veterans, gets married along the way

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and their friendly Chihuahua "Harley", who has logged an impressive 60 miles.

Harley's the comedian. Mareike has posted a "Harley joke" nearly every day throughout their journey, on Facebook. On Tuesday night, she laughed that she couldn't think of any more jokes. Harley had already told her all the good ones.

It's been a long and winding road for the Yocums, who had ventured more than 5,400 miles when they arrived in Grover.

"It's winding down though," Troy said, with a tinge of sadness in his voice. "Actually four months from tomorrow is supposed to be the end."

They plan to hit Raleigh this week, Washington, D.C. on May 26th and New York City by June 16th.

September 3 is also marked on the calendar — the two-year anniversary of Troy's last paycheck. But he seeks neither fame nor fortune in his journey. He walks for his fellow veterans.

The first step

It all started when Troy was serving in Iraq. "My good friend sent me an email. He's an Iraq War veteran also," Troy said. "His job laid off a couple of thousand people, including himself."

His friend's situation was dire and his outlook was grim.

"For me, I think going to a suicide prevention class the next day and sitting in there and listening to all that brought up memories of my grandfather who was a World War II veteran. He shot and killed himself in 1980," Troy said. "And then to learn that we had set all-time record highs in the last three years in a row for veterans killing themselves, I thought, you know, this is not a coincidence."

"The economy has tanked. Unemployment for veterans is rampant. Everybody is obviously hurting because of the economy but the veterans are just — wow," he said, still shaking his head thinking of the disparity that claims his brothers- and sisters-in-arms.

The annual suicide rate among veterans is higher than the number of all of the American soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan since the war started in 2003. Unemployment among veterans between the ages of 18-24 is

twice the rate of the national average.

Troy contacted a lot of charities from Iraq trying to get his buddy some help, but found the list of veterans in need is long.

"So I just took matters into my own hands," he said.

Troy organized a benefit concert in Kuwait, which raised enough money to save his friend's house from foreclosure. He worked with another organization that found him a job.

"Once I finished with that I got the thirst to help more families," he said. "I discovered a story about Terry Fox who ran across Canada, in 1980, with one leg. I thought, well there's no way my story would be as inspirational, but if I can raise a quarter amount of what he did then I could help tons of veterans. And that's when I thought, well I'm not a runner either, but I can walk. I can walk all day long."

An idea was born.

"Now came the hard part — getting all the sponsors," he said.

He set up a camera, recording himself walking on a treadmill and streamed the video feed live to the world. "We kept gaining more Facebook followers and things started happening. It took a long time to get a lot of the sponsors, but once I got Louisville Slugger and baseball to kind of back me I thought things are going to pick up now."

And they have. The Yocums are now sponsored by nearly a dozen charitable organizations and thousands of followers.

Troy imagined that national media recognition would catch up with him about a year into his walk, but it came at a quicker pace. Three weeks into his journey, his mission was featured on Yahoo! News. It was picked up by CNN, Good Morning America, World News and several other national outlets. Like it or not, he was famous, shoved into the limelight, which has proved good for his cause and a shock to his ego.

"We may have had a couple of hits on our website before then, but that one single day it was thousands upon thousands of hits. The website crashed three times that day (the story broke on Yahoo!)," he said.

The star factor is something Troy still hasn't gotten used to. He's just a soldier



Troy and Mareike Yocum stand with their sidekicks Emmie the Super Dog, left, and Harley. Below, Troy Yocum steps off with fellow veterans SFC Castle of the South Carolina Army National Guard, Navy veteran, chef and innkeeper Marti Mongiello, and Desert Storm Army veteran Michael Mills (l-r).

helping other soldiers. But seeing a star-struck fan greet him on his walk has happened. He notes the encounters as interesting and sometimes comical. He's not in it for the fame, but fame, at times, has found him nonetheless.

"I'm a regular person. I'm not a movie actor. I'm a veteran," he says.

Oh the stories they can tell

The Yocums have a treasure chest of stories they can tell about encounters and events along their journey.

"I got kidney stones in the mountains," he said.

The pain started in his back and grew worse. He woke Mareike up, complaining of the pain. She drove him to the hospital. The stone was a quarter-of-an-inch wide. Doctors blasted it with ultrasound to help him pass it.

Then, he suffered from a foot infection in Texas.

"The problem was when I got my foot infection, the next two days were already planned and I had all of these people waiting to walk with me. I just had to endure it," he said.

They narrowly escaped a tornado in Virginia. Mareike picked him up and they made it into KFC mere minutes before it whirled outside. One of the veteran families Troy is helping lost their North Carolina home in a recent tornado.

Troy and Mareike are

staying wherever they can along the way, depending on the kindness of strangers, family and friends.

"We've slept in tents. We sleep in the car. We've slept in hotels, bed-and-breakfasts, ranches," he said.

One ranch in particular gave them a jolt. "This old lady had a big shotgun and a sign that said no trespassing. I was like, 'Mareike stop the car, stop, stop, stop,'" he said.

They heard a gun shot ring out. The woman was killing a rattlesnake at the time. When they finally made it to the door, she welcomed them — unarmed.

They stayed at a church infested with bed bugs. "Yeah, that was not good," Troy said.

But that wasn't the worst. "There was a place in Utah that had cockroaches you could surf on," he said.

Bed-and-breakfasts are their favorite because of their uniqueness and charm, he added. They were in for a treat in Grover. Disabled veterans and innkeepers Marti and Stormy Mongiello offered the Yocums lodging at The Inn of the Patriots and Presidential Culinary Museum.

Marti said that they were contacted by a volunteer in Oregon, who was trying to track down some safe places for the Yocums to stay. The Mongiellos were more than happy to help.

Love at first sight

Perhaps the story the Yocums love telling the most is how they met. Troy met Mareike on a layover in Germany. She was his tour



guide.

"It was a funny thing. The day before he came all my friends were like 'oh, that's so exciting.' 'Nah, he's just going to be here for a few days,'" Mareike said.

A part of her was not excited about schlepping a soldier around the country, but then he arrived.

"He came out of the airport and then I was like, 'wow!' she said, with excitement still glowing in her eyes. "It was weird. That has never happened before."

"I had planned on going to several other places, like Sweden and Berlin, but when I got to Hamburg," he said, he stayed for a little while.

His number came up again to go back to Iraq and he shipped off for six months of duty.

"We had each other for 12 days and then he was gone," she said. "And everyone said, 'it's not going to last. He's going to go down there for six months and you

only knew each other for 12 days'. But I thought, I'm gonna wait. I'm not going anywhere."

After his tour, he flew back to America. She came to visit him about a month later. They flew back to Germany, where he visited a couple of months.

"I came to visit him again last year and my flight was canceled back home because of a volcano on Iceland and I was stuck here. I couldn't get a plane for two-and-a-half weeks," she said.

But that was a good thing. He proposed soon after.

"I've got enough stories for three or four books," Troy smiled. That's the goal after the walk.

"We've been through so much. We've learned so much and we've made many mistakes along the way," Mareike said. "You learn from every single one of them."

...And you treasure the memories.