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October
2009

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31

12 FROM THE PUBLISHER Publisher Jim Langdon on the impact of a Tulsa educational beacon.

CITYBEAT 15-34

15 FOX TALES Meet Tulsa's infamous Biker Fox.

16 FIRST PERSON Expo Square President Mark Andrus talks Fair and Square.

18 HOW TO ... Make beer at home.

20 LUNCH WITH ... Pathfinder Award winners Mable Rice and Maxine Horner.

22 THEN AND NOW A look back at Tulsa's oldest tennis club.

24 BUSINESS Gavin Manes and his company, Avansic, help business and legal clients retrieve electronic data.

26 NONPROFIT The Oklahoma Blood Institute offers a variety of vital services for local health care facilities.

28 NOT SO LONG AGO John Hamill recalls Halloweens of yesteryear.



92

31 EDUCATION TCC's new Center for Creativity offers a multidisciplinary approach to creative education.

34 BARRY FRIEDMAN AT LARGE God's work is never done.

LIFE & STYLE 85-93

85 BEWITCHING STYLE

86 TOP OF HER GAME Ultra-runner Kathy Hoover.

88 TRAVEL Dr. Tom Harrison on the art of travel.

92 PASTIMES The Tulsa Craft Mafia provides a haven for artists to create and sell unique handmade wares.

FOOD+DRINK 99-110

99 DINING IN Pumpkin perfection.

102 TABLE TALK The buzz on Tulsa's tastiest products, places and events.

104 DINING OUT Cherry Street's White Owl Pub offers a variety of upscale pub-food specialties.

106 DRINK A taste of Italy.

107 DINING DIRECTORY



104

THIS MONTH 141-160

141 SPOOK SHOW Stephanie Colburn's Halloween musicals.

142 ARTS FEATURE The Tulsa Youth Symphony celebrates 46 years of inspiring young musicians.

144 OUT AND ABOUT

148 CHARITABLE EVENTS REGISTRY

150 EDITORS' PICKS ... What to see and do in T-Town this month.

152 GALLERY HOPPER Breast Impressions Inc. raises awareness of breast cancer through art.

153 TULSA SOUND Dave Matthews Band, The Jeff and Vida Band and October's other best bets for live music.

154 GET THE PICTURE The annual "In Focus" documentary-film series returns to Tulsa this month.

157 BRAVO! Upcoming events at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center.

160 THE LAST WORD Connie Cronley's fruity discovery.

TRAVEL BY TAMMIE DOOLEY

Reaching new heights

Dr. Tom Harrison on the art of travel.



Tom Harrison prepares to summit the Matterhorn in Switzerland.

Photos courtesy of Tom Harrison

MUCH HAS BEEN written about the distinction between travelers and tourists. Robert Louis Stevenson said of the art of travel: "The great affair is to move."

Despite the romanticized verbiage associated with the traveler, no judgment is intended. The two are different, nothing more.

It's not necessary to have read much or traveled far, however, to spot a bona fide

traveler. Another quote comes to mind: "You'll know it when you see it."

Meet Dr. Tom Harrison. Had Harrison never traveled outside the state, he would still be a traveler. His irrepressible attitude and outlook on life mean he can create a journey out of a spin around the block on his bike. He not only epitomizes Stevenson's take on travel; Harrison expands upon it.

Harrison has, however, traveled beyond the state and country. And a bike ride around the block is called a "warmup."

In 2008, Harrison climbed to the summit of Switzerland's famed 14,692-foot Matterhorn, a feat he says a grade-school primer prompted decades earlier. He's also scaled other mountains in Switzerland; climbed the entire Mount Blanc circuit; and ascended Croagh Patrick, the highest mountain in Ireland, and New Hampshire's Mount Washington.

He bikes 20 miles a day when the weather permits. The most recent bike trip ended with him blowing past bikers half his age to complete a five-mile steep ride up Cadillac Mountain in Acadia, Maine.

He's a certified ultralight pilot with more than 300 hours in the air and a graduate of Offshore and Annapolis sailing schools with charter certification. In June, he bought an Aprilia Mana 850 Italian racing motorcycle that he plans to take to an upcoming meet in Taos, N.M.

"I will not be racing it," he says. "I get sweaty palms at 90 mph."

Harrison is an impressionist art appreciator and collector; loves the theater, movies, hiking, snorkeling, reading financial how-to's, political thrillers, detective mysteries and biographies; and declines to call himself a wine connoisseur, although he knows more than most.

"Other than that, I just sit around," he says.

At 64, few could keep up with Harrison. Three cardiac rehabs and an open-heart surgery haven't slowed him down. If anything, they've provided the propellant to launch a full-fledged attack on his "bucket list."

"I'd rather be a human doing than a human being," he says.

After semi-retiring from Diagnostic Imaging Associates in 2004, boredom came calling during recovery from the open-heart surgery. So Harrison began piano lessons, becoming accomplished enough to play for a friend's daughter's wedding at The Summit Club recently.

Harrison's penchant for embracing opportunity and taking on challenges



Above, Harrison pilots an ultralight. Right, Harrison on a cycling break just west of Peoria Avenue off 15th Street overlooking Maple Park.

begin early. After earning a bachelor's in pharmacy from Howard University in 1970, Harrison was hired by Sam Walton to be Wal-Mart's first pharmacist in Broken Arrow in 1973. Harrison decided medical school sounded good and graduated in 1977 with the charter class of Oklahoma State University's College of Osteopathic Medicine.

Harrison has been married to Frances for 43 years. They have two sons and four grandchildren. When asked about traveling together, he says, "Frances prefers to travel in comfort, the antithesis of my philosophy. Maybe there is something to the saying 'opposites attract.'"

They recently enjoyed a Disney Cruise together in the eastern Caribbean with their 10-year-old grandson.

"It was pretty much of the relax-and-sight-see variety, so I can do it," he says.

Biking in New England during the fall foliage and sailing and snorkeling in the U.S. and British Virgin Islands are two of his favorite repeat destinations, but Harrison also has a deep affinity for a few places that do not pivot around physical activity.

"I love London for the quality of the theater and the overall ambience," he says. "And Norway for its fjords, Iceland's Blue Lagoon and its other-world/moonscape from all the lava rock and Switzerland's pristine alpine beauty."

He's had the "ultimate small world" encounter on the Italian Riviera with a couple he'd met years earlier on a bike trip; covered every main and back road on the Greek island of Santorini on a motor-scooter; and had an older couple exchange the terms "small boy" and "Hilliary" as he passed them during a hard-charging conditioning hike for the Matterhorn.



Harrison's traveled the world but says of local travel, "I am in awe of the beauty here every time. I bike over the pedestrian bridge and along the Arkansas. The spectacular and unique natural beauty of our state and national park systems rivals anything on the planet."

He adds, "Just exploring and appreciating other people and their unique cultures is an adventure in and of itself."

What's left on Harrison's list? Biking in the Adriatic region of Eastern Europe, Sicily and France; hiking to Mount Everest's South Base Camp at 17,600 feet; and climbing Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro comprise the short list.

"I may have to grow old, but I don't have to grow up," he says.

If Harrison only had the time to write, he could add "life and travel philosopher" to his illustrious list of accomplishments. ■

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