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Hiker takes AIDS-walk concept to the extreme

[Oakland Tribune](#), [Apr 17, 2005](#) by [Monique Beeler](#), STAFF WRITER

THE JOURNEY of a thousand miles starts with a single step, the saying goes. On Saturday, 22-year-old Michael Lissner will string together the first of thousands of steps that will lead him along the 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail.

A recent graduate in English and world literature from Pitzer College, Lissner has spent the past six months working at a Berkeley wilderness store. This week he'll strap on his hiking boots, throw his lightweight, handmade sleeping quilt into his pack and hit the trail.

Lissner and a college pal will begin their five-month trek in Campo near the Mexican border. Their journey will lead them through six of the continent's seven ecological zones, from low desert to arctic-alpine territory. They'll pass through the Mohave Desert, Yosemite National Forest and the Northern

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Cascades, ending their trip in Manning Park, Canada, in late September.

Lissner is turning his epic foot march into a philanthropic venture; he's gathering donations for each mile he walks. Proceeds will benefit the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative.

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Q: What backpacking food are you least looking forward to eating on your trip? Describe your planned diet.

A: I'm pretty sure I'm going to get pretty tired of carbohydrates, probably pasta and bagels. Word has it you eat 6,000 calories a day. You have to eat while you're walking in order to get anywhere at all.

Most people do a bunch of breakfast bars -- three or four a day. You eat, hit the trail for a while, eat, hit the trail, eat ...

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The estimate is (that you need to carry) 2 pounds of food for each day. The longest that we'll be between food stops is eight days, so I'll carry about 16 pounds (of food at most).

Q: What's the most unexpected, non-essential item you'll be carrying in your backpack?

A: I'm taking this neat little toy that records the temperature as often as you tell it to. It's called an iButton. It's so cool. I love this little thing. You can upload it to your computer and create (day-by-day temperature) graphs. It looks like two or three quarters stacked up. And it has no output or interface until you plug it into your computer later.

I'm also carrying a shot of adrenaline. It's in case of anaphylactic shock -- it's the same thing that happens to someone who's allergic to bees if they get stung. I'm just being prepared.

Q: What's the longest period you've spent on a long hike before? How do you plan to combat boredom and solitude?

A: About a week. I have no plan. I do (expect to get bored). I plan to have a lot of stick-to-it-iveness. I love using that word, by the way, just because it is a word.

I'm sure there will be a part when I'll be walking along and I'll be like, "Man, this is lame. I just want to get out of here and eat some pizza."

... The trip I went on last weekend, there were a couple of hours when I was bored. I found if you watch nature, it's pretty interesting. In that case, I went and watched clouds. It was cool, because a storm was brewing.

Q: What first got you interested in hiking?

A: I was a Boy Scout and I am an Eagle Scout. That's how I got interested in hiking. ... I think we bumped into a thru-hiker (someone hiking the Pacific Crest Trail) while on a scouting hike once. I didn't know that was possible before.

Q: Have you had any personal experience with AIDS? Why was AIDS research your cause of choice?

A: My roommate's mom was doing a marathon for AIDS, and my other roommates's sister was doing a marathon. The other thing was I read a book. They were talking about Bill Gates ... and how he eventually formed the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. One of the things they (support) is AIDS research.

If you look at the numbers for AIDS, it's pretty shocking. In some of the sub-Saharan in Africa, the population is decreasing every year because of AIDS. If you go to the Silicon Valley right now you see a lot of empty office buildings. I can't imagine walking down a street and seeing empty homes (caused by AIDS deaths).

Q: How have you been training? What have you done to keep it interesting?

A: Think about walking a marathon every single day. In the beginning it will be less. Later it will be more every day.

I've been really lazy. I just got sick -- again. I've been doing some bleacher training at Cal -- put on a backpack and go up and down bleachers for an hour.

I've also hiked at Big Basin, anywhere it's (hilly), Point Reyes, Big Sur, Tilden.

Q: Do you have a favorite nature writer? Who and why?

A. It would either be Colin Fletcher or Bill Bryson. I think I'll take the classic route and go with Colin Fletcher. He writes about his trips and gets really into detail. He wrote the biggest, most complete book about backpacking ("The Complete Walker"). It's in its fourth edition.

He tries to give you a way of looking at nature and seeing its beauty. He's a well-revered backpacking writer. He's gone on the PCT, and he's the first person to have hiked the Grand Canyon from end to end. It's a really challenging thing to do. He had to talk to native peoples that were there to figure out where the

rain pools are.

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Q: Any critters you'd hate to meet on this trip?

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A: Depends on what they're doing. I would say raccoons, probably. On this (recent) trip, I was sleeping under my tarp with my pack and everything in the rain. I woke up to see my pack moving away from me outside my tarp. The clever little bastard moved my flashlight, so I couldn't find it. I learned a valuable lesson: Tether your pack to something.

Q: How do you suspect this experience will change you or your thinking?

A: That's a tough one. I'm just going to become more patient, I think, and more aware of my impatience.

Q: What are your plans for after the hike?

A: I'm deliberately leaving the future after the trail open. I'm sure it will change me somehow, but I'm not sure how. The big question for me will be will I want to do another big trail?

-Learn more about Michael Lissner's fund-raising hike in support of AIDS research at [www.aidshike.org](#).

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