

## **Canoeists steer currents in drive for rescue truck**

*by Jason Hewlett*

A desperate need for a new rescue truck prompted 16 search and rescue volunteers to paddle their way from Clearwater to Kamloops on Sunday.

Each participant collected pledges to go towards financing the \$160,000 vehicle. Kamloops Search and Rescue volunteer and B.C. Ambulance Service paramedic Mike Ritcey didn't have a dollar amount by late Sunday afternoon.

The canoeists left Kamloops by 6 a.m. The canoes were in the water at 7:45 a.m. The fast-moving North Thompson River rifled them through the scenic valley in record time.

"We didn't expect to get in (to Riverside Park) until 3 p.m.," Russ Dreger said once the canoes were beached shortly after 2 p.m.

"That's a pretty good time."

Dreger and his brother, Glen, acted as stern paddlers on the two six-metre long canoes. The brothers were also the excursion's guides.

The Dregers have been putting paddles in the water for about 35 years each. They believe the crew, which was mostly comprised of novices, did well despite some hairy moments.

The scariest section came at the rapids near Heffley Creek. Dreger said a canoe is fine as long as it stays with the river's flow. Any leanings can crash the watercraft into sharp rocks or capsize it.

"If you get into the wrong place there, you'll flip over pretty fast," said Dreger. "Those big canoes with eight people in them don't turn on a dime."

Fortunately, the volunteers followed instructions, paddled forward and didn't lean too much to either side. Some water sopped into the canoes, but not enough to have anyone bailing like mad. Even with a quick break for lunch at McLure, the expedition managed to make the 100-kilometre trip in a little more than six hours.

"We had a beautiful day. It was a fairly strong, easy paddle," Dreger said.

Kamloops SAR spokesman Brad Russell said about \$30,000 has been raised towards the vehicle in the last year.

The Thompson-Nicola Regional District has promised to contribute \$77,000 to the truck if SAR can match it. Russell hopes Sunday's excursion brings the group closer to that goal.

"We can see the finish line," he said.

This will be the first new rescue truck to grace Kamloops Search and Rescue. The vehicle is a necessity because it carries all the gear volunteers need to save lives.

The current truck was built in the mid-1980s. Russell said it's on its last legs and costs the organization money.

"If it doesn't run, the volunteers need to use their cars, and then it's a case of who carries what. Ultimately, we'd rather not have to do that."