

As seen in



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Hitting the road

Phoenix couple to trek cross country for Citizenship Counts

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When most people retire, they look forward to taking it easy. Not Diane and John Eckstein.

John, a semiretired Mayo Clinic physician, and his wife, Diane, a retired social worker, both 69, are getting ready to take a five-month adventure across the country to promote Citizenship Counts, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in Phoenix dedicated to inspiring young people to appreciate the value and responsibility of citizenship.

Diane first heard about Citizenship Counts when a friend asked her to join its board. "I jumped at the chance," she says. "The mission of the organization spoke to me."

Founded by Holocaust survivor and local resident Gerda Weissmann Klein, Citizenship Counts engages young people in civics education and gives them an opportunity to host a naturalization ceremony or participate in a service-learning project.

Weissmann Klein married her liberator, U.S. Army intelligence officer, Kurt Klein, and, two years later, became a naturalized U.S. citizen.

According to Melanie Reilly, Citizenship Counts program coordinator, the organization offers a free civics curriculum to schools nationwide, targeting middle school and high school students.

"We work with private schools, parochial schools public schools and after-school programs," she says. "There's no limit to the way our curriculum can be individualized for students' needs."

The curriculum includes learning about the process of legal immigration and the rights of being a United States citizen.

As John learned more about Diane's work with Citizenship Counts, he too became interested. "If you learn early what your responsibilities are as a citizen and what it means to be a good citizen, then as you grow up, you'll vote, you'll be an informed citizen, you will participate in your community and do community service," he says.

About a year ago, John started thinking about taking a cross-country trip, but doing it in a different way. "I've driven across the country a couple of times, and of course, you drive very fast and don't see it all," John says.

He adds, "I've exercised all my life and I thought maybe

I could combine my passion for exercise and adventure to serve an organization that I believe in and that I believe our country needs now more than ever."

He decided to ride a bike and walk across the country to raise awareness and money for Citizenship Counts. The goal: 3,500 miles and \$3.5 million.

The pair will raise money through donations from family and friends and people interested in the message of Citizenship Counts. "We're hoping people will give a donation of support per mile," Diane says. "We've already had some substantial donations."

"I thought it would be a real adventure for Diane and me and our dog, Kipp," John says. Diane will accompany him, but

won't be biking or walking. "I'm going to be taking care of John," Diane says. "I'm a support person."

Kipp, their 15-month-old black German shepherd, is in "boot camp" with a trainer to learn obedience, because on the trip the Ecksteins will be visiting schools and encountering many people. "He's being taught to be calm and confident," John says. "He's really going to be the star of the show."



Diane and John Eckstein will make a five-month journey with their dog, Kipp, from San Diego to New York City to support Citizenship Counts.

Photo by Amanda Rudolph

continued next page

Hitting the road (continued)

They will be traveling with two young people, Kelly Winter and Tyler Reber, “adventurous young-adult citizens who believe in the Citizenship Counts cause and want to accompany us on our journey,” Diane says.

Winter and Reber will follow the Ecksteins with a van, and bike and walk with John. “Our friends and family are very relieved that we have young people to watch over us,” Diane says.

The mechanics of the journey

The 2012 Journey will start in San Diego on Jan. 27, and end in New York City in early June. John’s goal is to ride 50 miles on day one, walk 15 miles on day two, ride 50 miles on day three, rest on day four and then repeat the cycle across the country.

The Ecksteins will travel in a recreational vehicle and stay in RV parks and campgrounds, at their own expense.

The caravan will travel across the southern United States, stopping in Tucson; Phoenix; Las Cruces, N.M.; El Paso, Texas; Austin, Texas; College Station, Texas; Dallas; Little Rock, Ark.; Memphis, Tenn.; Nashville, Tenn.; Indianapolis; Chicago; New Bremen, Ohio; Pittsburgh; Washington, D.C.; Philadelphia; and New York City.

They plan on being in Arizona during the state’s Feb. 14 centennial celebration and hope to take part in a naturalization ceremony in Tucson.

Reilly says the Ecksteins worked with Citizenship Counts staff to find schools across the country that would be interested in participating. They’re hoping for at least one school in 12 of the major cities to complete the curriculum and “host an event to culminate and celebrate the classroom study of citizenship,” she says.

The schools must request permission to host a naturalization ceremony through the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services office, Reilly says. “From there, the schools and students get to help plan the ceremony at which candidates to become new citizens are sworn in.”

The Ecksteins also will stop in small communities along the way and give presentations based on the Citizenship Counts curriculum.

Kelly and Tyler will help with the presentations as well as talk to children and future teachers at the schools of education at universities along the route.

To document the journey, John and Diane will write a blog and take photographs and video. John will wear a webcam to record his experiences on the road. The blog can be accessed through citizenshipcounts.org.

Kipp will also be “writing” a blog, John says.

“He’s been dictating to me already. I’ve recorded some of his thoughts.”

They hope that children along the route will read the blogs and get excited about Citizenship Counts.

On the blog, the Ecksteins will feature citizens of the day or of the week — naturalized citizens who are examples of good citizens in what they have achieved and contributed to American life, John says.

“The blog will be educational for the kids as we go across the country. They can follow us on the website and we’ll teach them about the history and geography of their locations,” John says. “We hope to impart some educational as well as inspirational messages.”

Weissmann Klein inspires

The Ecksteins are hoping that Weissmann Klein, who is 87 years old, will be able to join them for some of the larger ceremonies. “She is a magnetic, dynamic speaker,” John says. “Gerda and the mission of the organization are really the inspirations for us doing this,” John says.

Weissmann Klein wants this to be her final legacy, according to the Ecksteins, because as much of an optimist and joyful person that she is, her story has been one of pain. “This gives her a lot of hope,” John says.

Weissmann Klein survived a 350-mile death march in the dead of winter in Czechoslovakia and Poland at the end of World War II, after being imprisoned in slave labor and concentration camps.

“She so loves this country and appreciates her freedoms and the liberty and the ability to say things without being thrown in prison,” John says.

With the journey less than two months away, the Ecksteins are busy preparing. John says that while they’re on the road and he starts to feel sorry for himself when his muscles ache, he will think about Weissmann Klein and what she went through.

“That will be inspiration for me to carry on,” he says.

“We’re going to plant seeds and show up and try to stimulate people to teach good citizenship and then practice it,” John says. “If we can do that, then we will have achieved our goal.”

For more information or to make a donation, visit citizenshipcounts.org. Diane and John Eckstein are the sister and brother, respectively, of Jewish News owners Flo and Paul Eckstein.