

Cold, tiring and inspirational

Plight of teens helps fuel Carmel Valley man's channel try

By Michael Gehlken

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Blair Cannon predicts personal agony.

Next week, goose bumps are scheduled to cover his 225-pound body. Each freestyle stroke will turn heavy, as if his saltwater swim was through sludge. His rehabbed left shoulder will ache. His stomach will growl.

During great endurance tests, a time comes when every breath seems an emergency, every second is counted, and every instinct screams to stop.

"At some point, I'll be tired, cold and hungry," said Cannon, 40, of Carmel Valley. "But for me, that will be temporary. For some of these kids, that is what they experience day in and day out — except when they're at school ... I have no lack of inspiration. These kids inspire me."

At about midnight Aug. 5, Cannon will dive from a boat near the shore of Catalina Island and attempt to swim, without a wet suit, 21 miles across the channel to Point Vicente in Palos Verdes. He hopes his efforts will raise \$210,000, or \$10,000 per mile, half of which will be donated to the Monarch School and its student body.



Blair Cannon swims past a diver as he warms up for a training session at La Jolla Cove. Cannon plans to swim across the Catalina Channel. Fred Greaves photo

The other half will go toward the nonprofit Scott & BR Great Friends Foundation, where Cannon is on the board of directors, and its college scholarship program for high school seniors in a Marine or Navy family.

There are more than 13,000 homeless children in the San Diego region, said Ronne Froman, Monarch School CEO.

The school, which has a public-private partnership with the San Diego County Office of Education, relies on community outreach to provide such amenities as showers, clean clothes and multiple meals a day, including two dinners a week, for the students.

“These are the kind of kids that are living with multiple families in a hotel room,” Froman said. “They could be living in a car. We know some of our families actually live in the bushes in Balboa Park. These children are in crisis all the time.

“But when they come to Monarch, unlike going to a regular school, they don’t have to explain why they can’t bring another kid home to meet their parents. At Monarch, everybody understands, so our children feel safe here.”



Blair Cannon chats with other swimmers before a training swim. Fred Greaves photo

Blair Cannon’s swim

About \$75,000 in total donations have been received so far. Donations can be made at monarchschoools.org

The school is in an overcrowded facility, for kindergartners through 12th graders, on West Cedar Street, but is expected to relocate to a new, larger campus next spring. It will be able to serve about 350 students and no longer combine two grade levels into one classroom, said Joel Garcia, Monarch principal.

A single-day high of about 180 students attend the school during its year-round school year.

Tara Barrows, a second- and third-grade teacher, says she has the “most rewarding job in the world.”

visited her class and told the students about his swim. The students asked him about sharks, how he would eat and whether or not owls would be flying over him.

“The coolest thing is kids are kids,” Barrows said. “When I take them on a field trip, no one would ever know (they’re homeless) ... On the day-to-day, it’s easy to forget. They’re eager to learn, happy to be there. They’re upbeat and optimistic, and that’s what I get to see every day, which makes it such a great job.”

Since 1927, about 200 people have successfully crossed the channel, according to the Catalina Channel Swimming Federation, which sanctions the swim.

Cannon said the key to joining them is having a purpose.

He found his inside a classroom at Monarch.

“I get choked up about it,” he said Saturday, taking a long pause. “The satisfaction of showing these kids you can do anything you put your mind to.”