Bratislava or Bust…On a long journey for dementia sufferers

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Kim Henson meets a young enthusiast from Dorset driving an old Toyota to Bratislava to help raise funds for a charity supporting dementia sufferers and their families…



Ready for the journey… Major sponsor Andy Saunders (left) and Niall Brown (right) with the 16 year old Toyota RAV4 in which Niall and his pals are driving to Bratislava in Slovakia, raising money for Dementia UK.

These days there is much talk in the news about dementia. So there should be, with an estimated 800,000 people in the UK (plus many millions more, around the world) suffering from this awful affliction, which is a progressive condition…

Dementia – typically encompassing a number of symptoms, including loss of memory, difficulties with reasoning, failing communications skills, and the reduction in, or disappearance of, a person's ability to carry out normal daily activities – affects both men and women, and people from all walks of life. Although more prevalent among older people, there are approximately 15,000 people in Britain under 65 years of age, who are suffering too.

As many families know, living with and trying to help someone with dementia is a difficult, frustrating, distressing and often heartbreaking business, and sadly the numbers of those affected is set to increase in the future.

Dementia currently has no cure, although research into it is continuing and the hope is that one day the condition will be mastered so that fewer families will have to go through the pain of 'losing' a loved one to it. Sadly, funding (or, more accurately, lack of) in this crucially important area remains a major difficulty.

RAISING AWARENESS – AND CASH

Aware of dementia and its many implications, a group of young medical students studying at Edinburgh have decided to get involved. They have entered the exciting 'Bratislava or Bust 2014' challenge, in aid of Dementia UK. This is a national charity, committed to improving the quality of life for everyone affected by dementia, and notably including the provision of mental health nurses specialising in dementia care, and known as 'Admiral Nurses'. These people represent a lifeline for thousands of people around the country.

The 'Bratislava or Bust 2014' challenge involves participants buying a vehicle (under a 'gentleman's agreement, costing less than £500) and driving it to Bratislava in Slovakia. To raise money for the charity, there's a registration fee of £95, and each individual participant has to raise a minimum amount of £250 in sponsorship.

After a successful event in 2013 (which raised £12,000 for Dementia UK), this year's promises to be even bigger and better (it is hoped that even more money can be raised this

time), with approximately 30 vehicles and their enthusiastic occupants booked to take part.

Among them is the Toyota team, as mentioned above. This comprises Niall Brown, Conor McCann, Connor McKee and Ollie Bourton – all medical students at Edinburgh, who share a house in the city. Another friend, Ryan Loughead, was due to have travelled with them, but unfortunately a serious injury sustained in a rugby match has left him unable to drive at the moment. However, so that he isn't forgotten, the team's vehicle, a 1998 Toyota RAV4 costing just £495, has been decorated in 'camouflage' style to have connotations with 'Saving Private Ryan'…

I asked Niall, who hails from Corfe Mullen in Dorset, how and why he and his friends had decided to take part. He explained that a friend from First School days made him aware of the event, and having discussed it with his housemates, they thought that it would provide a good mix of charitable endeavour and fun. They are well aware of the serious side of their journey, especially as they are studying medicine, and wanted to do something to help in the huge, ongoing battle against dementia.

The event starts in St. Omer in France on 31st July, and takes participants on an adventurous 1,500 mile, seven day road trip across Europe, through France, Belgium, Lichtenstein, Italy and Slovenia, into Slovakia. There is a slightly competitive element, with prizes being awarded at the end of the run, for the 'best turned out vehicle'.

Niall explained that there is no set route, with each team finding their own way to each day's given destination. In the case of his team, they will be following a traditional map, rather than using satellite navigation systems.

Niall further advised that ALL the money given in sponsorship goes to the charity, with no deductions being made (for example) for the vehicles, fuel and accommodation costs, which are all met by the participants themselves.

He said that he is very much looking forward to the event, in terms of helping to raise cash for a worthwhile cause, and in seeing Europe and its different countries along the road to

Bratislava.



The Toyota has been sign-written for this epic journey, in addition to which Andy Saunders has poignantly added 'Maureen' to one of the decals, in memory of his mum Maureen, who suffered from dementia.

KAMPERS AND KARS

In a quest to raise sponsorship money, Niall wrote to a number of businesses close to his home in Dorset, and the most enthusiastic response was received from Andy Saunders, who runs his 'Kampers and Kars at Pottery Service Station' motorhome and garage business (originally started by his late father) in Poole.

Although Andy is modest about it, readers may know of him because of his worldwide fame for his imaginative custom car creations of the 1980s/90s – including the lowest and shortest BMC Minis, plus many other fantastic vehicles.

Immediately, the Toyota team's quest struck a chord with Andy, whose late mum Maureen

was a victim of dementia, so at first hand Andy was well aware of the awful effects of the condition, and caring for a family member suffering from it.

Andy kindly agreed to provide the minimum £250 sponsorship required by Niall in order to take part in the event. In addition, Andy arranged to have the Toyota specially signwritten. He said, “I wish the lads all the best and think it’s great that youngsters are taking an interest like this, in helping others”.

Here at ‘Wheels-Alive’ we shall update you in due course, regarding the progress of our fund-raising heroes in their trusty Toyota. “Good luck” to them we say too.

HOW TO DONATE

If you would like to make a contribution to this very worthwhile cause, you can donate via Dementia UK’s website (www.dementiauk.org), where there is much more information about dementia and how the charity operates.

Additionally or alternatively, if you’d like to support Niall and his friends in their charitable mission in aid of Dementia UK, please go to: Niall’s own page for giving (http://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/NiallBrown – Niall Brown: Bratislava or Bust), and make your donation (which can be increased by the Gift Aid scheme if you are a UK taxpayer).



Will Niall's very smart-looking £495 Toyota make it to Bratislava? We certainly think so and hope so. Here, with Niall at the wheel, the RAV4 is about to set off on possibly the longest trip so far in its 16 years.