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"He's an amazing guy "

By Susan Gilmore
Seattle Times staff reporter

For Seattle adventurer Dimitri Kieffer, taking on challenges is the stuff he's made of, but his latest adventure was more than he expected.

"Keep in mind that the odds are against us, considering the fact that no one has made a successful crossing in the past in the winter from the U.S. to Russia," he wrote in a recent e-mail to friends. "As someone stated to me, if it was possible it would have been done before. Well, we are going to give it our best."

Kieffer, with fellow adventurer Karl Bushby from England, are now in Russian custody after crossing the 56-mile stretch of the frozen Bering Strait on foot from Alaska. The adventurers were picked up by authorities entering the small settlement of Uelen, near the point where the Bering Sea meets the Chukchi Sea. Because they didn't enter at a border crossing, they had no stamps in their passports and were detained.

To his friends in Seattle, this is the ultimate Kieffer story, another chapter in a storied life of a man who shucked his career with Microsoft to travel the world in search of grueling adventures.

Like the one last year, in which he did the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race on foot, pulling a 150-pound sled over 1,100 miles.

It took him 41 days, said his friend Don Wahl, and that's where he met Bushby, who is trying to walk from the tip of South America to Britain. He persuaded Kieffer to join him on his Bering Strait walk.

It wasn't a tough sell, said Kieffer's friends. They said Kieffer's mission in life is to do all the tough endurance races he can find.

That's why he ran 145 miles across Death Valley in 140-degree heat and raced, biked, hiked, kayaked and rafted 600 miles across Vietnam. He also crossed the tip of Africa on foot, bicycle and kayak.



Dimitri Kieffer worked for Microsoft for 15 years as a globalization manager.

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Erik Nachtrieb, a fellow adventurer, said that when Kieffer first attempted the Death Valley race he didn't finish it, so he went back and completed it, but not in the cutoff time. So he did it all again and finished on time.

"Once it's in his book, he'll make sure he'll do it," said Nachtrieb. "If he hadn't completed the Bering crossing, he'd do it again and again until he made sure it was done."

Kieffer, 40, worked for Microsoft for about 15 years as a globalization manager, a position that makes sure Microsoft programs are understandable around the world.

Nachtrieb said he spoke with Kieffer about quitting his job.

"He said he was thinking of some things he had to do in life," said Nachtrieb. "He said he could always go back to work, but didn't know if he could go back to this part of his life."

Born in France, Kieffer visited Seattle as an exchange student, attended Puyallup High School and fell in love with the area. He moved here and took the job with Microsoft. He became a naturalized citizen last year.

Nachtrieb said Kieffer told him that he had concerns that he didn't have all the paperwork he needed to walk into Russia, but he didn't expect to get arrested. "He's a very focused individual and very determined," Nachtrieb said. "When he's going to set out and do something, he'll do it."

While he was hauling equipment for the crossing, he and Bushby were in a tent sleeping on a block of ice and awoke to find the ice had broken loose and they had drifted 28 miles out to sea. They had to be rescued by helicopter and Kieffer suffered frostbite on a finger.

But that didn't stop them from completing their walk. They even had to swim with protective suits for part of the trip.

While the crossing was 56 miles, Nachtrieb figures they actually went more than 150 miles because of the shifting ice that caused them to backtrack.

Jennifer VanGorder met Kieffer through adventure racing and called his determination contagious.

"He makes you want to go out there and do things," she said. "He is one person who is excited about life. He loves life, loves pushing it and experiencing it."

Nachtrieb said he and Kieffer next want to row across the Atlantic Ocean, from the Canary Islands to the Bahamas, in a 32-foot open boat. Maybe in two or three years.

Another Microsoft friend and adventure racer, Michelle Maislen, said she's going to try to persuade Mayor Greg Nickels to issue a proclamation honoring Kieffer when he returns to Seattle.

"He's an amazing guy who has an unrelenting will to finish things," she said. "He won't quit."

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