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Motorcyclists finish 9,000-mile charity ride across Americas

The group of local riders collected about \$45,000 in pledges to help build footbridges in Zambia.

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A haggard group of Peninsula motorcyclists made a soggy finish Tuesday to a 9,000-mile journey that began in Peru about one month ago.

Newport News resident Ken Hodge, his daughter Katie Hodge, stepson Ryan Anderson and Chicago-based photojournalist James R. Petersen rolled onto the grounds of the James River Country Club astride their BMW motorcycles about 12:45 p.m. Following in a U-Haul was another group member, Jeff Dagenhart, whose motorcycle had to finish the trip in the back of a van after an unreparable breakdown in South Carolina.

The group was greeted by at least 50 of Hodge's fellow Newport News Rotary Club members, who stood in drizzling rain waving "Welcome Home" signs and chanting "Ride Baby Ride!"

"It was a wonderful experience," Hodge told the crowd after everyone moved inside. "It's good to be home." From day one, the group faced hurdles that would dog the fundraising trip until the end. In Lima, Peru, it took five days to get the group's motorcycles released from customs "due to bureaucratic deficiencies," Hodge said.

Soon after getting on the road, the first of several mechanical malfunctions — a dead motorcycle battery — beset the group.

That was followed by a bout of altitude sickness that Ken Hodge suffered in the Peruvian Andes. Other challenges included bogus police stops and a minor confrontation with Honduran militiamen.

Perhaps the group's most harrowing ordeal came when Dagenhart careened into a 15-foot-deep roadside ditch in Peru. He said the impact caused a compression fracture in his lower back and bent the motorcycle's rims and handlebars.

Yet Dagenhart rode another 7,000 miles before the beleaguered motorcycle finally succumbed.

The trip was an effort to raise funds for a Newport News Rotary Club project to expand, into the African nation of Zambia, its work building footbridges that has been successful in Peru and Honduras.

The club set a goal of raising \$60,000 and has applied for a \$300,000 Rotary International grant. So far, about \$45,000 in pledges have been received, Ken Hodge said.

Among those on hand Tuesday was Nasho Zombe, a Zambian national who was originally going to make the ride but had to pull out due to visa problems.

"This will impact Zambia in a big way," Zombe said of the club's plan. "It's an unconventional project that will help people develop and build Zambia's economy — something that will stick with the Zambian people for a long time."

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For more information about the project, go to www.rotarybridges7600.org.