



NEWS

Even at 81, Costa Mesa's Bill Burke shows few signs of slowing down



Bill Burke recently paddled the Missouri River solo, a 2,370 mile adventure he has added to his already long list of adventures. (Don Leach / Staff Photographer)

BY MATT SZABO | STAFF WRITER

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Bill Burke is a family man.

He and his wife, Sharon, have lived in their house in the Mesa Verde neighborhood of Costa Mesa for more than five decades. He has four children, 14 grandchildren and

three great-grandchildren.

Contrast those many relationships to his months spent paddling down the Missouri River last year.



Costa Mesa's Bill Burke, 81, is an extreme adventure enthusiast. (Don Leach / Staff Photographer)

“You can go for weeks without seeing a single soul on that river,” Burke said. “Not even a fisherman in a fishing boat. Especially on the upper Missouri, there just aren’t that many cities along the way.”

Burke is now 81. But when adventure calls, the extreme adventure enthusiast is still there to pick up the phone.

He completed his 2,341-mile canoe ride down the Missouri River on Dec. 11. That was nearly seven months after it began in Three Forks, Montana, though the trip was interrupted twice — once when Burke had to come home to handle some personal business, and again when his condominium in Palm Desert flooded during Tropical Storm Hilary in August.



Bill Burke paddles his canoe on the Mississippi River near the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. (Courtesy of Mark Fingerhut)

Burke wanted to finish his trip, known as the 'reverse Lewis & Clark expedition.' So he headed back on the water in October. But as the calendar turned to late fall, he said the weather dipped into the teens at night.

"At night, I would pull into a campsite and set up a tent because it was so cold that you can't sit outside," he said. "I would crawl into my sleeping bag at 5:30, and be stuck there until 7 a.m. the next morning. That's 12 hours sitting in one spot inside a tent where it's dark."

Burke leaned on some "river angels" along the way, who would take him into their homes and feed him a warm meal. But he also had to deal with hundreds of miles of lakes on the river that make travel difficult because of the lack of a current and fierce headwinds.

"It was a wonderful trip," he said. "The scenery on the Missouri River was just spectacular, especially the upper river in Montana and North Dakota. I wouldn't trade the experience for anything, but I wouldn't recommend anybody do it in the late fall or winter."



Bill Burke's "the purple hat" he received for recently paddling the Missouri River solo. (Don Leach / Staff Photographer)

These river trips — he also trekked down the Mississippi River in 2019 — are a change for Burke, who started his adventures after retiring as a lawyer at age 60. He has climbed the highest mountain on every continent, including Mt. Everest from the south approach at age 67 and from the more challenging north approach at age 72.

That same year, 2014, the government of Nepal named a mountain after him. Burke Khang ("Khang" means mountain) is 22,775 feet high.

"I'm healthy and strong and living life to my fullest," Burke said. "I'm doing what I want to do in my retirement. I feel like I've earned it. I didn't start any of these extreme activities, like mountain climbing or river paddling, until my kids were grown."



Bill Burke tips his cap on the Missouri River near New Haven, Mo. (Courtesy of Patrick Tenny)

His children don't always approve. Lisa Burke Giger lives close by in the Port Streets neighborhood of Newport Beach.

"Everything he does, he becomes the oldest person to accomplish that feat," she said, adding that the family sometimes lovingly calls him Mr. Magoo. "He definitely gets a rush out of it."

Giger posts her father's blog for him on his [Eight Summits website](#). Still, she said she supports some of his endeavors more than others. She and Burke's other two daughters, Lori and Amy, joined him on part of his Camino de Santiago walk in Europe in 2022.



A scarf hangs around a picture of one of Bill Burke's climbing adventures in his Costa Mesa home. (Don Leach / Staff Photographer)

"I know he's toying with the idea of going back to Everest and being the oldest," she said. "I totally will not be supporting that, just for selfish reasons. I think that would be kind of reckless ... I'm done with that. He leaves, and we're just like, are we ever going to see him again?"

Burke would actually check in via text message often on his Missouri River expedition. He said the Missouri is more difficult than the Mississippi, but he was more experienced this time around, so that played to his favor.

As for his plans for 2024, he said he does want to go back to Mt. Everest one more time. A long road trip with his disabled grandson, Oliver, who he goes on bike rides with each Sunday, is another possibility, as well as riding the Trans-America trail on motorcycle.



A view from Bill Burke's canoe from the upper Missouri River in Montana. (Courtesy of Bill Burke)

Yuichiro Miura of Japan was 80 when he summited Mt. Everest in 2013, the oldest to do so.

“I long to go back,” Burke said. “I love that mountain.”



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