Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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Dancing for slavery awareness, 'Planet Prancer' concludes second leg of his journey in Gallup

Travelers along Route 66 over the past several months may have witnessed an unusual sight – a man in a neon tutu dancing along the road with a rolling buggy behind him.

That man is Ben Hammond, 40, a lecturer at the University College London Institute of Education in the United Kingdom.

Hammond is known online as the Planet Prancer, calling himself the world's only long-distance dancer with one goal – to dance every step around the world, starting with the United States.

His trek across the U.S. began on March 28 at the Santa Monica Pier in California. The plan is to dance across the country, from Santa Monica to Chicago, and then work his way toward New York.

To date, Hammond has danced over 770 miles across two states.

“It’s a famous route,” Hammond said when asked about his Route 66 choice. “Europeans love it.”

Hammond’s undertaken the challenge in order to raise funds for Anti-Slavery International, a non-governmental organization, registered charity and a lobby group, based in the United Kingdom, which works to free people across the globe from all forms of slavery.

“I want to use my freedom to highlight the plight of 40 million people who don’t have the common freedoms,” Hammond said in an Aug. 24 interview. “They’re trapped in forms of modern slavery.”

To that end, Hammond said he chose to get people’s attention and raise funds through dancing, which he sees as a great symbol of freedom.

“I am not a dancer at all,” he said. “The point is [to] celebrate freedom by other people having freedom.”

Though he claims not to be a dancer, Hammond has undertaken similar challenges in the past. In 2011, he danced the world’s longest dance, time-wise, for over 135 hours; and in 2012, he danced the world’s longest dance by distance, going over 1,350 miles across Britain.

On this particular trial, Hammond recounted the challenges he faced dancing from Santa Monica to Ludlow, Calif., and then through the Mojave Desert to Flagstaff, Ariz. He said when he was in Bullhead City, Ariz., he started moving at 3 am and stopped at 10 am, as the

temperatures reached upward of 118 degrees.

“The biggest problem [I found] in Arizona: You can’t dance on the interstate,” he said, relaying what highway patrol said to him. “I had to take other [dodgy] roads.”

The roads he ended up taking were unfamiliar to him, and he was often on them in the middle of the night. This was in addition to having to climb to an elevation of 7,500 feet near Flagstaff, lugging the buggy he christened Barbara behind him.

“It’s difficult knowing when something is a road,” Hammond said.

Once he was past Flagstaff, the challenges continued to mount. Hammond recounted an unpleasant bout with gastroenteritis — an intestinal infection that brings diarrhea, cramps, nausea, vomiting and fever — near Winslow, Ariz. Then, once he passed Holbrook, Ariz., and headed toward Sun Valley, the region’s sand dunes slowed his pace to around nine miles per day.

“Then there were the monsoons,” Hammond said. “[But] I got some help from park rangers near Petrified Forest.”

Hammond was referring to Fire Service Road 4, east of Holbrook. In a Facebook post, he recounted coming down with heat exhaustion, having issues with the buggy staying upright, and dealing with the intense elements of nature.

But through it all, Hammond remained focused on his goal and has done what he could to make the experience enjoyable. Part of that included blaring dance music from his buggy’s speaker.

“I have [around] 1,600 songs on my playlist,” Hammond said. “It’s on shuffle.”

The songs were selected by his friends and family, and include plenty of peculiar choices. Hammond chuckled as he recalled times when he was in areas that may not have been entirely safe, as Britney Spears music burst from behind him.

“But lots of people are supportive,” he said, referring to the people he’s met who cheered him on or donated to the cause through his website.

On Aug. 22, Hammond entered New Mexico, and he reached Gallup on Aug. 23.

Hammond wrote on the website about how emotion nearly overcame him after finishing what he felt was the hardest leg of the journey to date.

“The view is beautiful,” he said when asked what was on his mind as he passed through Lupton, Ariz., and into Gallup.

Gallup meant the conclusion of the second leg of Hammond’s journey, and he said he’s slated to return to Los Angeles, Calif., by train on Aug. 27, before flying back home. When his vacation comes around next year, Hammond plans to return to Gallup and start the next leg, which will take him across New Mexico.

In addition to dancing across the country to raise awareness and funds for Anti-Slavery International, Hammond said the journey is also personal.

“[I] came to the U.S. when I was 8,” he said. “My family went to Chicago from L.A. on the train. In that way, I’m retracing my steps.”

To learn more about Ben Hammond’s cause, visit: www.planetprancer.com

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