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FACES IN THE CROWD / Local man, co-workers rally behind cancer fight / Jack Cruz will race across 2,000 miles in Mexico

By STEPHANIE KING, Houston Chronicle Correspondent

JACK Cruz has packed a lot of adventure in his life, from narcotics intervention for the U.S. Air Force to being a Special Texas Ranger and a Federal Air Marshal.

His latest campaign is to raise \$15,000 for the Candlelighters Childhood Cancer Family Alliance.

The organization provides emotional and financial support for children and their families.

Cruz, 36, and a Copperfield resident, will compete with his Pony Up team in The Pan Am Race, Oct. 25-Nov. 1 in Mexico.

The "pro rally" race will take him 2,000 miles from Oaxaca in the south to Nuevo Laredo in the north.

On a personal level

"I've seen cancer on a very personal level," said Cruz.

"This (project) has brought down a lot of walls for me. It has made me a better person."

The fact that the son of Gexa Energy co-worker Nate Foster is a Candlelighters' child fighting leukemia, made making the project a reality even more meaningful. Pledges to sponsor each mile of the race are being accepted through the "Miles for Smiles" program.

"It can be 1-cent a mile to \$1 million a mile," said Cruz.

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Gexa Energy, where Cruz and Candlelighters' Vice President Jay Beasley work in commercial sales, is the team's title sponsor.

"We were very impressed with the Candlelighters' efforts when we first learned of the organization," said Collin Coker, vice president of Gexa Energy sales and marketing. "So when we had the opportunity to support the cause and at the same time get behind an effort that was important to our colleagues, then we jumped at the chance."

Cruz has had a passion for racing since riding BMX bikes as a child. As an adult, he raced go-karts for several years and was an assistant instructor at a law enforcement driving school.

Restoring a 1966 Mustang

The team will drive a 1966 Ford Mustang in the race that was originally held in the 1950s by the Mexican government to promote a new highway system.

All cars must be built before 1965, but the Mustang qualified because it has the same body style as the 1965.

It is being restored by Classic Rides Auto Restoration of Katy.

"This car wasn't built to do what it is going to do," said shop co-owner Warren Vrba. "It is a doable challenge."

The carburetor will be adjusted for altitude, the suspension upgraded and a super-fortified fuel tank installed.

For safety, there will be a roll cage, a fire-suppression system, a "top-of-the-line" brake system and racing seats with memory foam to minimize fatigue and protect organs if they "bottom out." Cruz and co-pilot Robert Leal will average speeds of 140-150 mph on straight-aways. The race will be the first time in Cruz's eight years of marriage to wife Eren that he has "done anything like this outside of employment."

He left law enforcement not only because he achieved everything he wanted to in the field, but also so he could come home to his wife every night.

"She is nervous, but she has 100 percent faith in my abilities and judgment," said Cruz.

For more information about "Miles for Smiles," visit www.ponyupracing.org.

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JACK CRUZ

Age: 36

Occupation: Commercial sales for Gexa Energy

Residence: Copperfield



Fast fact: Will compete in The Pan Am Race across Mexico to raise money for a child cancer organization.

Quick quote: "I've seen cancer on a very personal level. This (project) has brought down a lot of walls for me. It has made me a better person." - Jack Cruz

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