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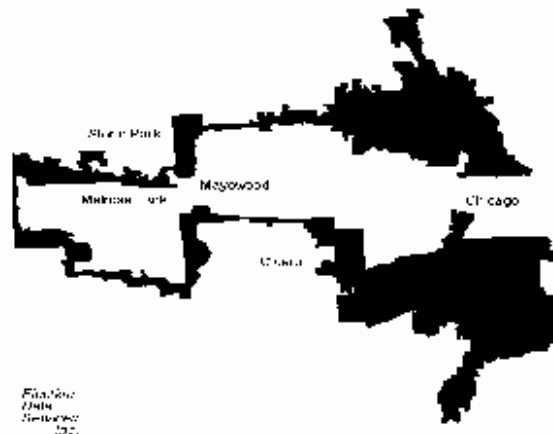
One man's quixotic quest to fight gerrymandering

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Would you run 1,000 miles through sleet and rain to promote a cause you believe in? One man in Pennsylvania will start such a journey this Friday as he highlights the abuse to the electoral process often known as gerrymandering. It's official title is "redistricting."

Last year was a census year so this year state legislatures will carry out the extreme mental gymnastics of creating new Congressional and state legislative districts. By now we have all heard of gerrymandering, the process of creating odd sized districts to influence election outcomes. Typically the process involves separating unified voter blocs so the party out of power will continue to stay in the minority.



Gerrymandered district around Chicago

When voters go to the polls in census years to elect their state representatives they are also deciding who will yield the pen to mark up those new districts. The battle becomes even more divisive in states that are losing Congressional seats (Pennsylvania) and state that are gaining (say, Texas).

The abuse of the redistricting process creates “safe” seats for politicians, which is one reason they fight reform to the process. The flip side of safe seats is that voters voices increasingly become meaningless. This is not a Republican or Democratic issue. Fairness in elections affects all of us and the ability of America to be a shining example of democratic freedom. Currently we are the only major democracy that redraws its electoral districts through such a convoluted process.

One man in Pennsylvania wants to call attention to the absurdity of the present gerrymandering process. He will do so this week by taking off on a 1,000 mile run around the Keystone State where he will: set foot in every Congressional district, spotlight the continuing abuses of electoral redistricting, promote reform in the process and go through an estimated three pairs of running shoes. He has called his journey, The PennUltimate Run. He will be pushing along a jogging stroller carrying all his supplies and camping gear.

The solo long-distance runner, Paul Mathison, knows his way around the state. For 25 years he has been a lobbyist dealing with issues before the legislature in Harrisburg.

Paul has been the good kind of lobbyist; among his accomplishments are helping to pass victims’ rights laws including the “No Means No” anti-date rape law and the Pennsylvania version of Meghan’s Law. He is just the kind of guy you expect to take on the Herculean task of running 1,000 miles to promote redistricting reform.

Paul is no stranger to fighting major battles. Almost three years ago he was diagnosed with Mantle Cell Lymphoma, an aggressive form of non-Hodgkins Lymphoma. It is so rare that there are only about 3,000 cases a year in this country. After a series of treatments that literally left him gasping for air, Paul is thankfully in remission.

I asked him why, with all the other things going on in his personal life, he is bothering to focus on redistricting. Paul replied, “I saw my life span shortening from 3 or 4 decades to 3 or 4 years. Seeing that shrinkage in the horizon of your

life hits you in the face. This is a cause I believe in that needs more attention.”

To Paul redistricting reform would look like this: transparency in the process, compactness of districts based on geography (not who lives in them) and the removal of politics from the process. Other groups that support fairness in redistricting are the League of Women Voters, Common Cause and Democracy Rising.

I've known Paul for over 25 years, ever since he was our class president when we both attended grad school at Wharton. If anyone has the determination to fight these two battles it's Paul. His quest starts this Friday, April 1st, the date selected because that is when final census data is due. You can follow the progress of his run around Pennsylvania here.

And if you just can't get enough about this topic here is the link to *Gerrymandering*, the 2010 documentary that really is a must see for those concerned about our democratic process.

UPDATE: Paul started his run on Friday, April 1st. We were part of an enthusiastic crowd that was there to send him off in a blinding snowstorm which seemed to be an April Fool's Day Joke played by Mother Nature.



Photo by Mike Milne

You can track Paul's progress in real time via GPS at www.pjmathison.com/id25.html