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MILWAUKEE--D.J. Rodrian calls it an urban adventure.

For several weeks, Rodrian and his dog, Titus, have been braving the sometimes treacherous trails alongside the Menomonee River, and it has been a humbling experience.

"One Saturday, we were surrounded by waist-high water," Rodrian said. "I had to carry Titus across."

Rodrian isn't a glutton for punishment; his rugged explorations have been to illustrate the travails faced by a growing number of people who are working to overcome significant challenges - poverty, alcohol and drug addictions, and criminal backgrounds - to lead productive lives.

"On the trails, there are obstacles, detours, and ups and downs. That's how life is," said Rodrian, who is in training for his one man, one dog charity run to raise awareness, volunteers and donations for the Milwaukee Outreach Center, where he volunteers.

He's making the 15-mile run, from Menomonee Falls to Wauwatosa's Hoyt Park, on Saturday; he's been collecting pledges for the run via Facebook and other online sites.

The center, which provides job readiness and life skills training, has itself undergone a metamorphosis.

It started out in the late 1960s as an outreach ministry providing bare necessities to the poor, before later realizing its work didn't bring about lasting change.

"That was our beans, Bibles and blankets era," said Will Hope, the center's executive director. "It was a lot of feel-good things, but we weren't really helping

in the long run. We were giving a hand out and not a hand up. It took us a long time to realize that that method diminished personal responsibility."

One of its central focuses is education.

"Education is a core component for a venue out of poverty," Hope said. "In order to compete in the workforce of today, they have to have a functional literacy capacity of eighth or ninth grade. It's not enough to have a GED."

The center, near N. 68th St. and W. Mill Road, uses a structured approach that begins with strengthening a person's academic and job-readiness skills before moving them into its job search and placement program. It also offers screening and placement services for employers looking for workers who are reliable, responsible and ready to work.

"These are well-prepared individuals who have job-training skills, have demonstrated reliability and employability," Hope said.

Each participant undergoes an evaluation of their skill level, including reading, reasoning, writing and math. They also must complete an assessment that includes any distractions that could be keeping them from sustainable employment.

They then enroll in the center's Phoenix Life Skills class, a one-week, 40-hour program set within a Christian framework, where participants develop and implement a personal mission statement and achieve personal and vocational goals as they prepare for the workforce.

The rigorous program attracts 400 inquiries each year, at least 200 apply and 100 graduate from the program. However, only 20 to 25 reach the outcome of part-time or full-time gainful employment.

"People have to stick with the program and be prepared to put their all in it," said Karl Wright III, who graduated from the program in December and will enter college this fall.

"I've seen a lot people who weren't buying the program who had their own agenda," said Wright, who himself had spent much of the last eight years repeating the cycle of drug use and prison time. "It was an ongoing cycle. I have a whole different mind-

set now. I am around positive people here. They keep me on track."

It's a difficult path, added Suzy Hendrix, who also graduated from the program. She is working as a certified nursing assistant and is scheduled to receive a degree in social work in August.

"Change is a process," said Hendrix, who is sober after years of alcohol and drug abuse. "You don't just snap your fingers and you're changed. It's an ongoing, lifetime process."

Advice that Rodrian, who volunteers at the center, gives to participants and is the reason behind his 15-mile river run.

"It's been difficult, just like trying to get a job is difficult in this economy," said Rodrian, who has raised \$3,000 toward his \$10,000 goal. "Just because something is difficult doesn't mean it's not worth doing. If you fall down, you get back up and keep going."



D. J. Rodrian and his dog Titus, train for their May 22 charity run in which they'll run down the Menomonee River to raise awareness, volunteers, and funds for the Milwaukee Outreach Center. They successfully completed 16.6 miles and raised more than \$5,000 through the grass-roots effort.