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U.S. Resident to Make 114-Kilometer Peace Walk Across Northern Ireland Commemorating 1969 Civil Rights March

Ken Johnston has been commemorating the 50th Anniversary of key Civil Rights events in the United States by walking long distances to symbolically retrace the experience of people who marched for our present day liberties.

In April, Johnston plans to continue his “Walk to Freedom” journey, when he departs for Belfast, Northern Ireland to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the 1969 “People’s Democracy March” from Belfast to Derry.

“My 114-kilometer long walk from Belfast to Derry is modeled on the 1965 Selma to Montgomery Right to Vote” march, led by Dr. Martin L. King, Jr.,” Johnston said. In 2018 Johnston walked 644-kilometers from Selma, Alabama to Memphis, Tennessee, as part of the 50th Anniversary commemoration services for Dr. King, to pay tribute to the late Civil Rights leader. He stopped in many of the places where King led protests, in order to reflect on the changes in those communities since that time. “Even today, while African Americans now have the right to vote in all of the U.S., in some places that right is being suppressed,” Johnston explained.

“The first leg of my 2018 Freedom Walk was the 86-km “Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail,” and that was when I began thinking about a similar Civil Rights movement in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and early 70s” stated Johnston. He continued, “In Belfast, I hope to become the first person to have walked both the “Selma to Montgomery Trail” in the U.S. and the “Belfast to Derry Trail.” He says, “By doing these walks just 12 months apart, I hope to symbolically link these two Civil Rights movements.”

In his book *Black and Green*, author Brian Dooley quotes Nobel Prize winner John Hume—founder of the Social Democratic and Labor Party and one of the architects of

the Northern Ireland Peace process—in a 1985 speech at the University of Massachusetts, declaring that “the American civil rights movement gave birth to ours. The songs of your movement were ours also.”

“The Civil Rights story in Northern Ireland, as well as in the U.S. today, is really about Human Rights, and it’s a story that has been evolving. I am inspired by the success of truth and reconciliation in Northern Ireland since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement,” says Johnston. He explains that he wants to meet local leaders and learn community healing strategies, and share these insights with organizations in Selma and other parts of the United States.

Johnston’s “Peace Walk” will start at the Belfast City Hall on Wednesday April 10—the 21st Anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. He looks forward to meeting people along the route who are working to break down barriers that separate the humanness that we all share.

Ken Johnston is the Amherst Irish Association’s 2018 Margaret Maher Award recipient, and while the award provides plane fare to Ireland. Johnston is still trying to raise \$4,000 for other expenses for his journey, via a GoFundMe page.

He welcomes any support from the community. To learn more go to:
<https://www.gofundme.com/commemorating-northern-ireland-civil-rights>
Or visit Ken’s Walk to Freedom website at <http://ourwalktofreedom.com>.