

# Athens man rides for rainforest network

by **ANGELA METZ**

POST staff writer

Lucian Spataro Jr., a 31 year-old Athens native and former OU student, said Sunday he has faced a daily marathon of sorts since May 19 when he began a 2,850-mile horse-back ride across the United States.

So far he has completed about 2,200 miles of the trip and raised about \$85,000 for the Rainforest Action Network, which is based in California.

Spataro and his companion horses have encountered wild animals, weathered a lot of sun and were side-swiped by a truck, he said. But the group continues to endure the problems and raise public awareness of rainforest depletion.

"The rainforest is like a moderator in the ecological system," Spataro said. "It keeps things from surging, like cold and hot, wet and dry."

About 50 public officials, Athens residents and students welcomed Spataro and his crew Sunday at the Dairy Barn, where Mayor Sara Hendricker proclaimed this week "World Rainforest Week" in Athens.

In addition, a benefit concert held Sunday night at Baker Center raised about \$100, said Jeff Westen-



Lucian Spataro

TIM BATH/POST PHOTO

barger, co-chairman of the OU Ecology Club and a sponsor of the event.

Spataro said he rides for about eight hours every day and averages 200 miles each week. He drives back to the previous day's stopping point to begin each ride

Spataro gets support from two

horse trainers, a two-man video crew and a public relations person who travel with him. With the exception of Spataro, the crew is paid by corporate sponsors who also supply them with the horses, recreational vehicles, trucks and equipment.

"Our primary objective is to make people aware of the issue," Spataro said, adding that the group's second goal is to raise money for the rainforest network.

He estimated that the group has talked to some 15,000 people along the way and reached even more through media coverage. "I think we've touched four or five million people."

Spataro said he chose to raise awareness by riding horses across the country because the horses attract attention.

In May, he began his two-phase trek in Los Angeles with a horse named Sweet William and rode with him to Oklahoma. Together,

they set a record for one-rider, one-horse trips by traveling 1,500 miles in 63 days.

The second stage of the trek is from Oklahoma to the East Coast with two other Arabian horses, Sea Ruler and March Along, who sport reflectors on their tails. He said one horse is used for rural areas while the

other is ridden through cities.

"One is more street-smart than the other," he explained.

He hopes to end his 4 1/2 month journey Oct. 8 just east of Washington, D.C. This will result in a record for one-rider, multi-horse trips.

A partner in an assembly facility in Tuscon, Ariz., Spataro got the idea to couple the ride with the rainforest issue while he was traveling on business and saw some of the rainforest depletion. According to rainforest network information, more than 50 million acres of rainforest are destroyed every year, and more than half of all rainforests already has been destroyed.

OU geography Professor Ted Bernard said corporations use marketable rainforest materials for many things such as making furniture and raising cattle to supply fast food restaurants. An expanding population near rainforests also contributes to the depletion.

He said the loss of carbon-absorbing trees can contribute to global warming.

Although Spataro said his trip has been "mentally and physically difficult," he remains optimistic about its outcome.

"I think good things are going to come out of it, but I don't know what yet," he said. "The most important thing was for us to make people aware, and I think we've done that."