

Cycling from 1B

It was conceived by Chris Condit, a UT Austin student who himself was a survivor of Hodgkin's lymphoma since the age of 11, as a way to not only raise awareness for cancer research, but funds as well.

Only a Herculean gesture could fight the epidemic of

cancer, so the gauntlet was set; Every year, undergraduates and graduates from the Texas school would make a 4,500 mile bicycle ride from their comfortable dorm rooms in Austin to the harsh environment of Alaska.

The riders — 71 in all this year — ask anyone for donations toward cancer research, or to simply share stories about

cancer survival.

The students split up into three routes to work their way to the "last frontier." The Ozarks route winds its way through the Midwest; The Rockies route cuts through the great western mountain range.

And then there's the Sierra route, considered by some to be the most grueling of the bunch as it goes through the sweltering deserts of Nevada and up through the hilly Californian, Canadian and Oregon coasts.

It holds the toughest climb of all the routes with a 15,000-foot elevation and 111 miles in the Lake Tahoe area.

"Brutal," was the only word cyclist Sarah Nielsen could say of that leg of the trip.

And it's not luxury living. Sometimes on a desolate stretch of the Nevada "Extraterrestrial" highway, they'll sleep in tents. Food is scarce and their breakfast often consists of a bag of Skittles candy. And, as many will tell you, the snoring of fellow travelers keeps them up at night.

But that's generally not the norm. Riders rely on different host institutions along the route to put them up for the night. St. Andrew's in Florence is one of them.

When cyclists first arrive in town, they're treated to their own dune buggy tour at

Sandland Adventures. After that, it's off to Coast Fitness for a dip in the pool and relaxation in the sauna.

Afterwards, a giant feast awaits them at St. Andrew's.

Finally, the cyclists break up into smaller groups where Andrew's partitioners and local volunteers invite the students to spend a night in their homes.

Early the next morning they're back on the road again, with a quick stop to the Sea Lion Caves.

The pinnacle of Friday's festivities was the St. Andrew's meal. Seventy-two people were served: 23 Sierra route cyclists and 49 hosts and guests.

The meal is "Thanksgiving in July," a two-room buffet featuring all the traditional fixings: Turkey, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole and every type of dessert imaginable.

Elbow room was sparse in the dinner hall, but the feeling was intimate. Cyclists sat with hosts and traded stories about why they were there, what Florence was like and the problems of cycling through adverse conditions.

The students stood up and said who they were, what they were majoring in and a funny story about their journey. This is where the complaints of the snoring kept creeping up.

Toward the end of the

evening, a small group of cyclists got up in front of the crowd and shared the ideals of the Texas 4000; hope, knowledge and charity. The points were covered with personal stories of those who cycle, why they cycle and the circumstances that led them to take this journey.

They asked for money at the end, but they felt it wasn't the driving force of the evening.

Comradery, they agreed, was the true spirit.

When asked about what she learned about herself on the trip, cyclist Brittany Perez said she was so surprised by the basic common kindness of people.

"I had never realized that before," she said, looking around at all the smiling faces in the room. "I was so scared to go up to people and ask for help; we have to ask for donations all the time. I didn't think anyone would ever say 'yes.' But so many people did. You just don't realize how many good people are in the world."

Chuck Pennington, Terri's husband and co-organizer, agreed with that sentiment.

"What we get out of them here is just amazing," he explained. "There's not too many people here under 40, or even under 50."

"To get that many young people together gives us hope for the future. It helps us realize it's in good hands."

Looking at the group, one would never have guessed they were cyclists, aside from their garb. Body types ran the gamut. The rules disallow anyone from repeating the journey, becoming mentors in subsequent years. Most new participants have really just biked around their childhood towns. This isn't about the sport of it all; it's about the cause.

Matthew Blake Lovelace is the most experienced cyclist of the bunch, riding since he was 11. As he did charity rides with his father and grandfather, cycling became a way of life.

"I love riding because it's a place where I feel completely at peace," he said.

His experience is the exception however, not the rule. Most are only casual riders with past excursions being their neighborhood cul-de-sacs or paved bike lanes, not the steep terrains of the Sierras.

And then there's cyclist Natalie Bonjourno.

"I'm the one who didn't know how to ride a bike," she said. When asked how she got to her 20s without ever being on a bicycle, she had no idea.

"It just didn't come up," she laughed, explaining that she learned to ride a bike the day before the group started training.

"I called my dad and was kind of freaking out. He got on an airplane to fly from Dallas to Austin just to teach me to ride a bike," Bonjourno admitted.

Now she's an avid fan.

"Sometimes people on the route say, 'I'm never going to ride a bike again.' I could do this every day now."

But why did someone who never rode a bike before decide to take a summer spin to Alaska?

"My cousin was diagnosed with ovarian cancer," she explained. "Right around the time I heard about the Texas 4000, she was in hospice care. I thought that by riding and I could continue her battle. I found out I got in (the race) the day after she passed away."

Every rider had, in one way or another, a personal experience with cancer.

Lovelace's grandfather, who he used to do charity rides with, was diagnosed with prostate cancer.

"I ride for him every day," he said.

Nielsen's father was diagnosed with terminal kidney cancer. He died within a year.

"I don't want another daughter to go through that experience," she said.

For Terri Pennington, a retired nurse who had frequently seen the devastation that cancer could leave behind through her work, the ravages of the disease hit her at an early age. When she was 16, her mother, at 52 years of age, lost her battle with cancer.

"That was a big motivator for me to host the group," she recalled.

The stories go on and on.

This became particularly noticeable during the Thanksgiving dinner, with hosts and cyclists sitting side by side, sharing their stories of survival and loss.

For the cyclists, cancer had come as a sudden shock in their young lives: A mother, a father, an aunt, an uncle or a friend.

For the hosts, the wounds and tolls of the disease were long felt and continuing: A husband, a wife, a son, a daughter and even sometimes themselves.

Younger generations looked to the future with fear, and older generations looked to the past with grief.

Cancer was the grim unifier.

But on that warm summer afternoon at the St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, fear gave way to hope. For every tragic story of loss that was recited, even more stories of survival were revealed.

Survival that, they believed, was only made possible with moments like these; disparate groups from across the nation, overcoming socioeconomic and generational barriers, sitting down together and simply talking, sharing and giving.

Selfless acts in defiance of fear, with the ultimate hope that cancer would one day fade, dinner-by-dinner, story-by-story.

And mile-by-mile.

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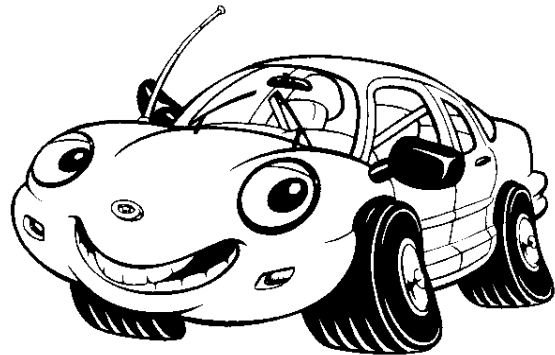


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GIVING BACK**NON-PROFIT SPOTLIGHT****Boys & Girls Club of Western Lane County**

Q: Describe your organization.

A: We know the future of our country rests with our children. Today's kids will become tomorrow's parents, workforce, and leaders. Our community of staff, volunteers, parents, and supporters believe that the promise of tomorrow begins today. Together, we give our youth a sense of hope, opportunity, and a sense that Anything Is Possible.

Q: What are your greatest accomplishments so far, this year?

A: 21 of the 30 teens that attend the Teen Center at least 3 times a week were on the Middle School Honor Roll. 8 of the 21 had a 4.0 GPA. 100% of the teens that attend the Club at least 2 times a week are on track to graduate on time.

One of the most important roles we perform is fighting the issue of homelessness. One of our primary efforts is to teach kids life skills and help them learn how to be successful in life so that they don't become homeless. Keeping kids off the street every day in a safe, supervised, fun, positive environment while they learn is what we do best.

Q: Do you have a personal story that describes the impact your organization has had in the community?

A: What sets us apart from other organizations is our only focus is kids and all our programs are specifically designed for kids from 6 - 18. Every day we touch at least 100 kids and their families in this community. We teach life skills to build character, citizenship and academic achievement. We actively focus on "catching kids doing it right" and to show them what success looks like. We mentor kids of all ages on topics that range from safe dating practices, to hygiene, how to handle conflict, and how to communicate effectively. We share their joy, their struggles, their fears, and their achievement every day.

Q: What is your current greatest need?

A: 64% of the students in our Programs have been identified by multiple state agencies as Economically Disadvantaged. 11% identified as Underserved. 40% of our current members come from single parent households that have no other place that they can afford. During our Summer Program, 48% of the members were on full scholarships at a cost of \$18,800. Because we do not receive any state or federal funding for any of our programs, our greatest need is donations that fund our programs so that no child is ever turned away because of money.

Q: Describe your organizations personality in three words.

A: Hope, Love, Faith

*Boys & Girls Club
of Western Lane County*

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