

AIDS Vaccine Micro-Ride Rolls On Despite PT Cancellation

By ERNIE MCLEOD

They'd raised the money. They were ready to ride. The ride was canceled. Some of them rode anyway. That's the simple version of the story.

The more complicated version starts at the beginning of August when, because they were 1200 riders short of their 2800 goal, Pallotta TeamWorks (PT) canceled its Montreal-to-Portland AIDS Vaccine ride only weeks before it was scheduled to take place (see the September issue of *OITM*).

For some of the riders who had signed up, however (having raised the minimum \$3500 required to participate), not riding was not a valid option. Gregg Gour, a PT employee at the time, was one of those who believed the "only responsible option was to still ride." Gour and a core group of organizers began a round of message board postings, phone calls, and e-mails that led them to decide to, "Ride Despite," a phrase that became the new event's slogan.

Easier said than done. For-profit PT (www.bethepeople.com) had a well-oiled organizational infrastructure that provided riders with everything from catered meals to hassle-free gear transport to accommodations in an "Amazing Mobile City." Further, PT was equipped to deal with the safety, medical, and liability issues a large-scale, multi-day bike trek could produce.

With the planned August 28 Montreal departure date fast approaching, the newly hatched non-affiliated ride had little in place besides enthusiasm.

Susan MacNeil, Executive Director of AIDS Services for the Monadnock Region (ASMR),

received a call (by way of *Yankee Magazine*) from John Beal, an organizing team member from Atlanta. MacNeil's response to Beal's appeal for help was simply to say yes.

Beal also contacted Vermont CARES for assistance in coordinating the Vermont leg of the trek and found them "extraordinarily helpful." "I must have talked to Tim Harvey a hundred times on the phone," Beal said, adding that Vermont CARES put a lot of effort into finding accommodations for the riders, no easy task at the start of the college year, and generously allowed him use of their phones and computers when he was in the area mapping out the trek's course.

In New Hampshire, Susan MacNeil got permission from ASMR's Board of Directors to provide support services, including use of the agency's 15-passenger van. Meanwhile, ride organizers went about finding local and national corporate sponsors, arranging for basic provisions along the entire 400-mile route, and gathering a diverse team of volunteers to accompany the riders and handle everything from boiling pasta to giving first aid.

Not-for-profit Charity Treks, LLC was set up to deal with liability issues, a website appeared (www.canadaride.com), the ride was renamed "Montreal to Maine AIDS Vaccine Bike Trek," and the number of riders who could be accommodated was capped at just over 100, about 2700 fewer than PT's original goal.

On August 28, an hour behind schedule, 100 cyclists aged 17 to 60-plus from across the US and beyond headed toward the Vermont border with a support crew of fewer than 20. Some of the riders were experienced athletes and veterans of the PT rides, though the majority

were neophytes and, interestingly, straight. All the riders were greeted with a "Hero's Welcome" lunch in North Hero and served the first of several donated high-carb meals at North Beach Campground in Burlington that night.

The second day of the trek was marred by rains that saturated both the riders and the Quechee campground in which they were supposed to spend the night. Some made do, others pooled out-of-pocket resources for a motel, sleeping four to eight to a room.

The volunteer group Susan MacNeil organized made dinner for riders the third night at the Cold Brook Campground in Webster, New Hampshire. James Kotusky, who works for Agouron Pharmaceuticals and has also volunteered on several Vermont CARES Champ Rides (www.vtcares.org/champride.htm), was one amateur caterer.

"We cooked almost 30 pounds of pasta, what seemed like 1000 meatballs, and heated more tomato sauce than I care to remember," Kotusky joked, "but most importantly we pulled it off. I volunteered because people needed my help."

Susan MacNeil also spoke about running on "amazing energy" rather than Pallotta-style "bells and whistles." When there were problems, "every answer was good enough. We put our faith in the integrity of well-meaning people who were going to make it happen. It's the kind of grassroots activity you don't see much anymore."

MacNeil acknowledged that the "safety net" PT provided participants was important. At least one person joined a support crew instead of riding due to personal safety concerns, though the Charity Treks event

did have medical professionals on hand and systems in place.

The fourth night when the riders arrived in Maine, they discovered that, due to a miscommunication, the place where they were supposed to set up camp wasn't going to work. Substitute accommodations were found despite the holiday weekend's heavy tourist load.

Riders and crew alike were already in a celebratory mood on the morning of the trek's fifth and final day. The weather was lovely, and with only about 40 miles to go to the final destination of Payson Park in Portland, it would be a comparatively easy ride.

One cyclist, a tiny woman named Uli, had ridden with a tall electrical conduit attached to her bicycle. From this makeshift flagpole flew a sizable white flag with a big red ribbon on it. As the ride progressed other people added smaller ribbons in memory of loved ones who'd died of AIDS. In what Gregg Gour described as a "spontaneous and joint decision," for the journey's final stretch riders began lining up behind the flag to create "an ever-growing moving memorial" that would lead them into Payson Park.

One rider's bicycle was stolen at a coffee shop a couple of miles from the end. He ran the remaining distance, crossing the finish line on foot to supportive cheers.

Inside Payson Park more typical rituals – part celebration, part elegy – marked the end of the trek: donated sheet cakes iced with congratulatory messages, hands held in a circle of healing, impromptu speeches, many thank yous.

Proceeds from the non-profit Montreal to Maine AIDS Vaccine Bike Trek will benefit researchers working to develop an AIDS vaccine

(see www.canadaride.com for links and more information). This event was an all-volunteer effort, one that participants plan to repeat next year with time to evaluate what worked, what didn't work, and what can be done to maximize the amount raised without exceeding grassroots capabilities.

There's also the issue of whether financially-strapped ASOs with limited personnel can afford to put energy into events – for-profit or not – which don't benefit them or their clients directly. Several New England ASOs Beal contacted, in fact, felt they couldn't do much to help. Vermont CARES and ASMR were notable exceptions.

Susan MacNeil understands why small, overburdened non-profits might be hesitant to step forward, but in the end she feels there's "no excuse for not participating if participants are willing to put themselves and their pocketbooks on the line. How can we say no?"

Tim Harvey, Program Director at VT CARES, appreciates that the organizers of this year's vaccine ride involved the local community, and he's pleased that CARES's reputation and contacts were useful for wading through last-minute logistics. He noted that when the PT ride came through Vermont last year, CARES didn't receive a call.

Harvey stresses, however, that the Champ Ride – which directly benefits CARES programs – is a critical fundraiser for them, and that involvement in outside events always has to be balanced against local needs. If future vaccine rides remain grassroots, Harvey can imagine a joint effort that would benefit both the local community and AIDS research.

John Beal's immediate hope is that those who volunteered for this year's trek will do so again, and that others will join in so that regionally we can figure out how to coordinate efforts and best support each other. ▼

Come Out, Come Out Wherever You Are UVM's National Coming Out Week Celebrates Changing Academic Climate

Departing from precedents set in previous years, the University of Vermont's LGBTQA Center will focus on local academics – plus a movie night and ballroom dancing – for National Coming Out Week rather than on national celebrities.

Past celebrations have counted on out celebrities like Ellen DeGeneres and Anthony Rapp to draw students, staff and faculty. But this year's events, said Center director Dot Brauer, highlight UVM faculty and graduate students' research and teaching.

Brauer denied that the change in focus is budget-driven. "We had the money or could have raised it, but it was a deliberate choice. There was some excitement generated by our awards event in April, and people were excited by the arrival of our new queer studies faculty member."

Brauer also said that the incoming class of first year students "appears to be more inclined to come out and participate and be active. I'm anticipating more activism on campus, not just the

same 10 faces."

She said she has witnessed a trend away from "a dichotomous way of assigning gender. That's not the way young people are identifying their gender."

Highlighting a new sense of openness, Brauer noted that at the opening meeting of the student organization Free to Be, 30 people came, and nearly a third were allies who were "excited about participating, they really wanted to be in that environment. Those walls are falling."

Starting on Monday, October 7 with a panel presentation – "Coming Out as a Scholar" – and continuing with a "Faculty/Student Forum on LGBT Issues in the Curriculum" on Tuesday, October 8, this year's events reflect and celebrate the University's move toward a more open academic climate for LGBTQA students and faculty.

For decades more experienced LGBT faculty on university campuses have advised younger faculty to avoid academic work focusing on LGBT issues until after they have been granted

tenure. Brauer noted that two assistant professors at UVM tested the existence of possible anti-gay bias in the tenure process by submitting tenure applications that reflected teaching and research focused on lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgendered issues.

In the spring of 2002, both of those candidates – Glen Elder, now Associate Professor of Geography, and Jackie Weinstock, Associate Professor in Human Development and Family Studies – were granted tenure. Professor Weinstock's application included her development of the first two LGBT-related courses to be accepted into UVM's official course curriculum.

During the same semester, UVM hired the first faculty member to arrive on campus with a background in LGBT Studies. Valerie Rohy joined UVM's English Department this fall, prepared to teach a course on Lesbians in American Literature as early as the spring of 2003.

Other highlights of the week include a special performance of *Dancing at Lughnas* at the

Royall Tyler Theatre followed by a reception, an alumni and parents weekend showing of *Scout's Honor*, a coffeehouse and open mic featuring the talent of local young LGBTQA musicians in the community, and a gala that will include ballroom dancing and a DJ spinning current hits at Burlington's City Hall.

October 2002 marks the eleventh year that UVM has hosted a "National Coming Out Week" series of events celebrating the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and members of its community and their allies.

All events – from the kickoff march on October 5 to the gala dance on October 10 – are open to the public. See the Calendar for specific events and locations. ▼

For more information about the National Coming Out Week activities or LGBTQA Services at UVM, visit www.uvm.edu/~LGBTa or call (802) 656-8637.