

voices from the mountains

AIDS RIDE: straight from the sidelines

by Elena Harap Dodd

On Thursday, September twelfth, 1997, I drove with my daughter's girlfriend to Boston. I was attending a weekend writers' retreat, while she and another woman from our Vermont community were going on the Boston-New York AIDS ride. Two state-of-the-art bikes were stored in the back of the car, along with carefully packed bags, thirty pounds maximum, of extra clothing, helmets, power bars, raincoats. The packs would be carried by van from one campground to another along the bikers' route. To join this massive, precisely planned fundraiser, each woman had solicited \$1500 in sponsorships; they had been training for months, on roads all around Southern Vermont and northeastern Massachusetts, to cover a 270-mile course between Friday morning and Sunday afternoon.

Approaching the city, we drove through Brookline, down Huntington Avenue to Northeastern University, the magnet where people and bicycles had already begun to converge. At a designated parking lot, riders representing a range of ages, pushing shiny Japanese models and beat-up bikes of no particular vintage, were arriving to register and get ready for a five-thirty departure the next morning. My companions unpacked their gear and said goodbye, already drawn to the challenge of three September days on asphalt highways, back roads, hills, bridges, and overpasses, across Massachusetts and Connecticut—a carefully-laid-out trail conducting the swarm of cyclists, three thousand two hundred in all,

into the heart of New York City.

I went to my weekend retreat still carrying the image of the two women's excited faces, still in admiration of their strength and fitness. When the weather turned suddenly hot, I wondered how they were surviving the long miles. Once home, I eagerly inquired how the ride came out.

My daughter's friend had made it, into Manhattan crowds cheering from the sidewalks, had posed for snapshots, smiling in victory. Hearing her recount the experience, a veteran now, I began to comprehend what she had done.

Despite the hype, despite protests that the ride, with its great profits to its organizer, Dan Pallotta, had become a tool of commerce, despite the question of whether money raised in many states (over seven million dollars in support of AIDS research and services) should have benefited only a single health center in Boston, these riders, going home with sore legs to sleep and take into their minds what their bodies had accomplished, had created a personal bond, a thread spun of their own life-force as they hunched forward over handlebars or sat back in ungainly energy-saving devices, mile after mile. They cycled past cheering relatives in suburban towns, past urban children who got into the act by pointing out road signs and detours, they settled like migratory birds on their campgrounds at night, to eat, sleep, and get up the next morning to mount their bikes once more. This gesture, the pitting of plain physical endurance and

wheeled contraptions—a peaceful army in lycra pants and shiny helmets—against the scourge of a disease arising out of, yet dreadfully subverting, human lifeblood and sexuality, spoke eloquently of hope.

It spoke also of identity, in this country where self-hood, gender, and cars become somehow enmeshed. The mass of bikers offered an alternative icon, at once less ostentatious and more uncompromising than the automobile. Riding in the company of thousands they reflected for a moment the larger world, broad streets of Shanghai, dirt roads of rural India, ordinary mornings in Amsterdam and Quito. On their two-wheelers, whatever the style, they seemed to be stating, I am who I am. They were coming out as human beings, women and men, young and middle-aged, lesbian, bi, gay, straight. For three days they made themselves visible without individual fanfare.

I grew up to the romantic rhythm of Alfred Noyes' highwayman, riding, riding, riding, to meet his hostage sweetheart, who proceeded to shoot herself in order to warn him and save his life. Here was another kind of riding, nothing romantic about the reams of sponsors' checks feeding into the organizer's bank account, no particular role assignments by gender, while the epidemic these cyclists wished to stem still stalks our species. Yet I see the AIDS riders as authentically heroic. Their brief takeover of roads and highways became for me a stubborn statement on behalf of health and self-determination. A flawed

achievement, as all our accomplishments are—but one that seems expressive of my hopes for our society.

Coming to recognize this, I understand why, during the hot September days in Boston, beneath the surface of my work and socializing, I chanted silently to my daughter's friend:

Ride for the gray faces, the young men leaning inappropriately on walking canes; ride for the children in jeopardy, swimming toward birth. Ride for Gay Pride. Ride for the women at risk on dark street corners; for the quiet dead in Thailand and Uganda; for talents that never ripened to maturity, love that bowed to loss. Let the country witness a solemn requiem in whirring spokes, strong legs bending and rising. Ride through the recollection of summer training on country roads where clusters of Queen Anne's Lace saw you pass, each round ivory eye with the dark pupil at its center urging you to this test; ride through the uninvited heat, through New England fall, passing orchards and pickers on your way to the Big Apple. Ride for the doctors in their laboratories, for volunteers testing new vaccines. Ride with a promise of help, a vision of cure. Ride, friend, for all of us, for those who are determined to live, for those who are determined to comfort and heal, for those who don't care, deny, are in danger; for those who will die; for those who will live when the AIDS epidemic is a relic of history; for families who can never forget.

Ride for me.

Curbside

THE PLAN ©1998 BY ROBERT KIRBY

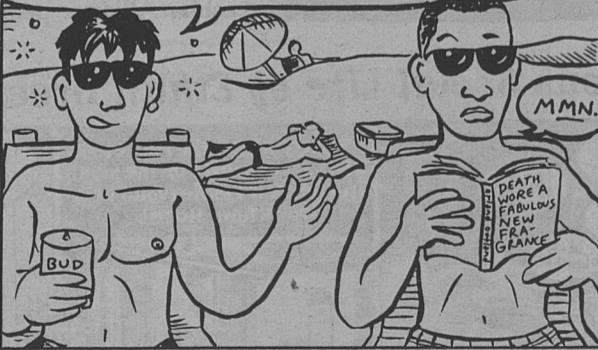
I TALKED KEVIN INTO TAKING NATHAN TO JONES BEACH WITH HIM TODAY. THIS GIVES ME A WHOLE AFTERNOON TO GET SOME WRITING DONE, AND IT'LL ALSO PROVE TO NATHAN THAT THE LEASH I WIELD IS A LONG ONE, AND I DON'T REQUIRE HIM AT MY SIDE EVERY SECOND.



THERE'S ALSO THE ADDED BENEFIT OF (HOPEFULLY) IMPROVING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THOSE TWO... I DON'T EXACTLY EXPECT THEM TO BECOME BOSOM BUDDIES IN ONE DAY, BUT MAYBE THE SUN AND THE WAVES WILL SOOTHE SOME OF THE TENSIONS BETWEEN THEM.



...YEAH, YOU'RE TOTALLY RIGHT ABOUT THIS, KEV, IT'S SO RELAXING LYING OUT HERE... I SPECIALLY AFTER MY HOT GIG AT THE VENUS LOUNGE THE OTHER NIGHT... DID DREW TELL YOU ABOUT IT? ME AND THE BAND WERE SMOKIN'!!



OH, I'M SORRY—YOU'RE TRYING TO READ AND I JUST KEEP ON TALKING! I'LL SHUT UP ALREADY, PROMISE! MIND IF I PLAY THE RADIO? JUST REAL QUIET...



OH GOD, I'M RUNNIN' BURP (scuse me)



MAYBE THIS DOVE-EXTENDING THE-OLIVE-BRANCH THING IS MY NEW ROLE IN THIS HOUSEHOLD... IT WOULD BE A REAL FEATHER IN MY CAP TO SPARK BETTER RELATIONSHIPS AROUND HERE. NATHAN WOULD BE SO PROUD...



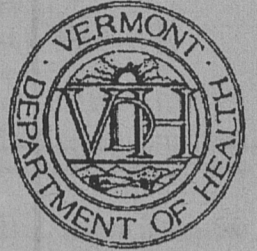
I NEVER SHOULD HAVE AGREED TO LET YOU TAG ALONG WITH ME.



YEAH? WELL SEEING HOW WELL I GET ALONG WITH YUPPIE TIGHT-ASSES, I'D HAVE TO SECOND THAT!

http://www.visi.com/~oprairie/

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