



Blazing a New Trail

"Are we on the right road, Molly?"

"I think so, Andrew."

"What do you think, Kenn?"

"It's really hot, and I'm thirsty."

And so we continued to ride down Basin Harbor Road. All three of us, biking in the wrong direction.

Each person or small group was riding a different journey — sometimes, traveling the wrong way or just backwards from everyone else; at other times, feeling confused with little or no sense of belonging to the larger group; toward the end, some physically unable to continue.

In these ways, the first Vermont CARES Champ Ride was a true testament to the struggles with poor education, disease and loss experienced in the AIDS epidemic.

Personally, I laughed, sang, cried, bitched and moaned myself

through the rolling green hills. I felt as if the hot tar and gas fumes didn't kill me, the grit off the dirt roads in my mouth might. What the hell was I doing out here? Are we lost?! Where are we? Are you sure you read the map right? Hot, instant fire lifted off the ground, blazing a new trail up to the sun. Scorched and blackened grains of sand and stone scattered in all directions.

Gears shifted the second I glimpsed the farmland being tended by the plows and tedders pulled through the fields, happy to see John Deeres and Internationals roll alongside and underneath the birds' wings, white clouds, and weathered barn boards yawning stretched out between the Green Mountains and Adirondacks.

A ride close to home complete with homemade maple walnut cookies — a little touch from the heart, baked by Champ Ride committee member Jen Cirillo — made

the Champ Ride seem like so many of the longtime traditions I took part in growing up in rural Vermont.

Cascading heat threshed my backside; sweat trickled, then dripped off my brow, neck, shoulders, arms, chest, legs. I harbored my effort to continue toward the next bit of shadow from this and that tree along the side of this or that road. My perspiration trailed off toward the lake, tracing back from the reservoir of strength and good memories born in times of similar efforts in the dance studios. Dancers and dead teachers, to whom I owe my abilities to accomplish such a challenge, flooded my thoughts, reminding me to use my body wisely. Breath. Relax your spine.

Maybe once in my life, before training for this ride, I had ridden a bicycle eight miles. Surely, I did not just decide to ride because I love to bike. I did not truly know what biking was before my journey into this began. I didn't ride for Vermont CARES or myself; my ride was for my friends. I rode because I am still alive and well; even if I hurt, I am strong and capable. And even if I burnt beet-red from the sun, I felt the gratitude that my own body gave me for helping an unnamed friend.

I helped to raise money for Vermont CARES. I did not have to spend a lot of time finding pledges; I raised close to \$500 in less than a 24-hour period. Andrew Huff of Burlington had to explain what he was doing and what Vermont CARES was to every person that pledged him money for the ride. By educating people about CARES, he volunteered his time to do more than ride in the event. He raised awareness of a local organization that provides direct outreach to the people of our state unlike any other program in Vermont.

Of course, none of this is to say that after 50 miles on a #*\$% hot day, I was not exhausted and cranky to have to still go up hills. There I was, Mount Philo, the last rest stop, or SAG, as it was called,

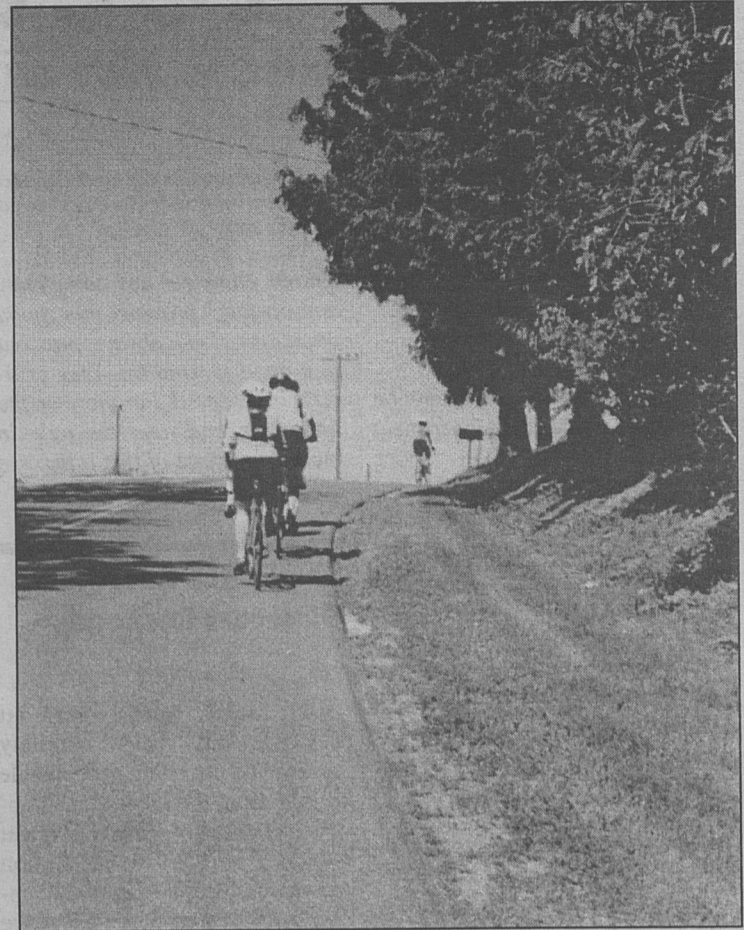


Photo: Thomas Henning

More than 80 bike riders raised over \$10,000 to benefit Vermont CARES in the first annual Champ Ride on June 12, 1999.

briefly sagging a little bit myself. Forget the finish line, the 57.40 mile odyssey had been so long already. I nearly felt we were well on the way to another planet!

Furthermore, Molly O'Neil and I had already lost our friend Andrew on the way back through North Ferrisburgh. If it had not been for Molly, at that point I, too, might have bagged the rest of the trip. After all, I had already ridden the 50 miles I originally promised to ride. We had come such a long way that it just didn't seem fair to have to go more than what I'd prepared and trained myself to undertake. I was pissed. I was tired. I was picking up my bike from the ground to follow my riding partner Molly up the next hill. So much for resting.

But through our pains, this first-ever ride raised more than \$10,000, and only 20 percent went to event costs, compared with overheads of up to 80 percent for other rides. The net was more than double the anticipated amount, and all of it goes to direct service to the community — none for administra-

tion. That says a lot to me about the integrity of this event.

Finances aside, there was love in this ride. I remember huffing and puffing my way up the hill into Vergennes when who did I see at the top but my friend, Jen Miller. Surprise, surprise, hugs and kisses and I was ready to continue. Kirsten Isgro was happy to be greeted with enthusiasm at the end, even though she and her partner were some of the last riders to finish. Similarly, Andrew Huff could not finish his ride because of a knee problem. Yet he was touched and impressed that he too received hugs, kisses, and veggie burgers after he arrived back from the road in the van. "I'll do the ride again next year," he insisted. There is no doubt in my mind that this will be a proud tradition, in which everyone who understands why we rode those many miles will return again.▼

Kenn Noseck looks forward to next year's ride, when 50 miles will be 50 miles, the routes will be marked more clearly, and he, Molly, and Andrew will benefit from better maps.

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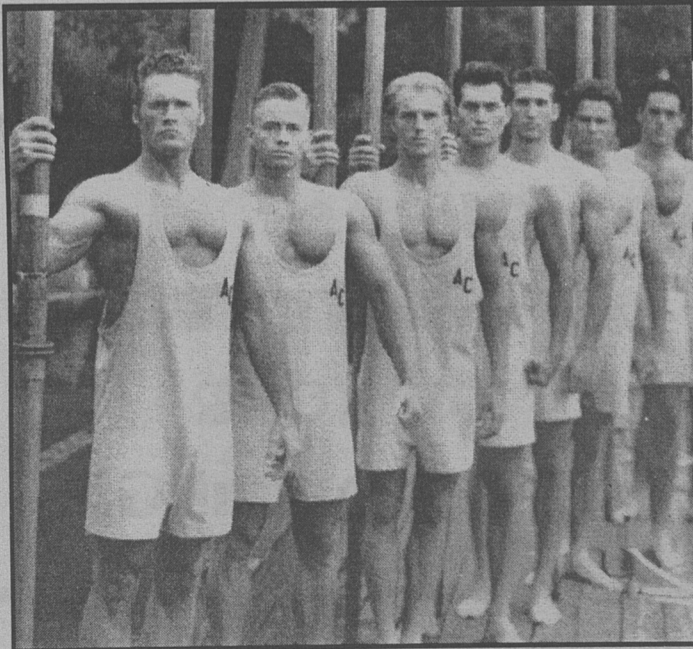
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