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Statewide bike ride puts cyclists' mettle to pedals

pa. Perimeter journey against cancer raises money, builds friendships among riders.

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By **KRISTEN ZIEGLER**
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The more than 50 bicyclists who were expected to leave Palmerton on Sunday morning to ride roughly 500 miles of rolling Pennsylvania roads have more in common than a love of cycling.

Since the first Pennsylvania Perimeter Ride Against Cancer, the participants have become both cancer-research advocates and a temporary support group.

"There is a lot of catharsis after you have ridden with a group of people for a certain number of miles and have suffered on the road together," founder Bob Freed said. "There is a real closeness in the group and through the week more people are willing to share some of their really personal stories."

Freed first cycled the state's 1,000-mile perimeter in 1983, when his 16-year-old cousin died from cancer.

"I was initially planning this to be a once-and-done ride," the Allentown resident said.

While he recruited his pastor and 21 other cyclists from around the country and mapped the 10-day journey, he found motivation to start the 24-year tradition.

"My father came down with cancer and actually died the day we came back," Freed said.

Freed said the now bi-yearly ride, which no longer skirts the entire state's perimeter, brought him new friends.

"One of my favorite riders was a gentleman from California (who) joined us for eight rides," Freed said. "He was a cancer survivor and lost one of his lungs to cancer so he was cycling the 1,000 miles on one lung as he got up there in years he came back to help us out" in the event's support vans, Freed said.

The friendly atmosphere is what attracted triathlete Janna Vaum to the ride.

When her grandmother died from cancer about a decade ago, she decided to join a friend on the cycling journey.

There were only 50 cyclists on this ride versus the thousands of people at other cancer events, she said. "Everyone close to the ride is affected by cancer," added Vaum, a Bethlehem resident.

Dave Pryor said while the bonding is "wonderful," the goal of raising money for cancer inspires the cyclists to continue the challenging ride.

"We are kind of ambitious competitive, goal-oriented people so everyone likes having that big carrot out there to strive for," said Pryor, who is art director at Lehigh University.

The first ride raised about \$20,000 and the event has earned more than \$735,000 total, said Rosemary Murphy, a representative of the American Cancer Society.

That money has purchased a van to transport chemotherapy patients to treatment and helped fund the local Web site and 24-hour hotline. It has also granted wishes to terminally ill children through Dream Come True, she said.

Sometimes Dream Come True families join the riders in the event's closing ceremony, Vaum said.

Knowing those families wait at the end of the route constantly inspires her, Vaum said. "Each pedal stroke you think of the families and the thousands who are impacted by cancer so if you can just get closer to a cure each pedal stroke is worth it."

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