



Bulletin
Cancer

Grandparents Pedaling for the Health of Grandkids

Florida cyclists prepare for cross-country fundraising ride to fight pediatric cancer

by: Blair S. Walker | from: [AARP Bulletin](#) | July 1, 2010



Airton Carmignani / Getty Images

No unit of measurement is sufficiently expansive to gauge a grandparent's love for a grandchild.

But to get a fix on Michael Libenson's affection for his late granddaughter Sammy Rotman, 2,400 miles is a somewhat useful yardstick. That's how far Libenson, 72, plans to ride a bicycle from Arizona to Florida next spring in honor of Sammy, who died in 2008 at age 9 of pediatric cancer.

Libenson will be joined by several of his contemporaries from his Sun City Center, Fla., retirement community as part of a 65-day project known as SammyRides: Grandparents Riding for the Health of Grandchildren.

"My granddaughter had bone cancer, osteosarcoma," says Libenson, a retired psychologist from Massachusetts. "She was a terrific kid. The thought came later on to me and a couple of friends—let's do a bicycle ride for Sammy."

Libenson ran the concept of biking to raise funds for pediatric cancer past several of his buddies who are grandparents, including John Nelson, 70, who worked for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for 35 years. "It started out being a ride around Florida, and we kind of talked it through," Nelson remembers. "I said, 'Come on, if you're going to do it, let's do it right.' "

Preparing for the road

Fluorescent-green SammyRides.com T-shirts were made, featuring a drawing of a little girl on a bicycle and “Fight Pediatric Cancer” on the front. On the back is an outline of the continental United States, with a straight line connecting Sun City, Ariz., and Sun City, Fla.

Nelson has been contacting media on the bikers’ route with the help of Sun City Center resident Karen Ryan, a former Syracuse University public relations professional who’s the project’s youngest participant at 54.

In addition to pediatric-cancer fundraising and prodding grandparents to promote the health of grandchildren, SammyRides has a third goal. “Young people should look forward to being older and enjoying their retirement years,” Libenson says. “Young people feel that once they lose their youth, they’re finished. This is a mindset that basically Madison Avenue has perpetuated and promulgated.”

A 2,400-mile bicycle ride is a grueling proposition at any age. Making sure that five riders, whose average age is 70, are physically prepared falls to avid bicyclist James Wheeler, 70.

“Right now they’re riding on Thursdays and Saturdays, but as we get closer and closer, they’re going to have to pick it up,” says Wheeler, a retired magazine journalist whose constant companion, an African gray parrot named Harry, has already logged 25,000 bicycle miles perched on Wheeler’s left shoulder.

“It takes a lot of muscle building to be able to do something like that and not be really, really sore every day,” Wheeler says, glancing slyly at Libenson, the least accomplished of the five cyclists. “We have one day, I think it’s about the third day in Arizona, where we’re going to have an 80-mile ride through the desert.”

“I know that by the time the ride starts, I’ll have a complimentary hearse in the back of the caravan,” Libenson quips, in response to Wheeler’s observations. “I’m the one he’s cracking the whip on.”

Human guinea pigs

In addition to everything else they’re trying to accomplish, the bikers will be medical guinea pigs. William Quillen, director of the school of physical therapy at the University of South Florida’s College of Medicine, will study each cyclist. He will measure each biker’s strength, flexibility, percentage of body fat and vital signs in the fall and again after the ride.

“I am not aware of a group of seniors who have done something like this,” says Quillen, 58, who specializes in sports-related rehabilitation. “There are going to be a lot of environmental stressors to their systems.”

A caravan of support vehicles will trail the riders, who plan to stop at 60 towns and cities during their 65-day excursion. Sammy’s grandmother and Libenson’s wife of 46 years, Lois, will be part of the caravan.

The core group of bikers will stop at children’s hospitals and at eight universities, since most of their grandchildren are college age. They also will encourage other grandparents to join the ride, whether it’s for five miles or 20 miles.

The cost of lodging, food and other miscellaneous expenses associated with the event is \$65,000, which has already been raised through private donations and local events such as bake sales. All pledged contributions will be earmarked for pediatric cancer awareness, Libenson says.

“We want to literally electrify the nation,” Libenson says, “so that they see grandparents connecting for the health of grandchildren.”

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