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Cyclists wrap up charity journey to Alaska

UT students traveled from Austin to raise money for cancer

By Amber Miles
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF
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Neither threatening rain nor forceful winds could keep members of the Texas 4000 for Cancer from reaching their destination.

The group of mostly University of Texas graduate and undergraduate students left Austin on bicycles June 1 on a 4,500-mile journey across the United States and Canada to Alaska to raise money for cancer research and services. The cyclists arrived Monday.

"One night while the riders were camping in Kansas, the rain was so hard that they had to pack up and hide in a barn," said Jillian Bissar, a member of the support staff. "There were tornadoes in surrounding areas, but they didn't turn back."

Bissar, a graduate student in social work, acted as cheerleader for her significant other and the rest of the riders.

She and others kept encouraging the cyclists even as the winds pushed against them and they rode into cold and wet weather.

After 10 weeks of pedaling, 40 members of the Texas 4000 arrived in Anchorage. Only one person had turned back.

The riders formed the Texas 4000 for Cancer because most of them have been affected by the illness themselves or helped a loved one battle the disease.

When Doug Condit rode his bicycle up a difficult hill, he thought of a family friend and mentor who died of Hodgkin's lymphoma. He knew that cancer was bigger than his problems. That's what kept him going.

"I can't give up or take a break, because those who suffered from cancer weren't able to take a break," Condit said.

Members carried the messages of cancer prevention, early detection and hope of cancer survivorship. Every morning, the group dedicated the journey to a cancer survivor or a victim.

Condit, who is not a UT student, moved to Austin about seven months ago. He said his brother Chris, the group's founder, was diagnosed with Hodgkin's when the two were younger, and that has also served as an inspiration.

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"I was 8 years old when Chris was going through treatment, and it was very moving and scary for me," Doug Condit said. "We've always been there for each other. And we always wanted to spend the summer doing something crazy together."

Condit said participating in the event has given him faith in humanity, because "people have been willing to help, and it's good to see that they are really good, deep down."

Shelly Hogan, communications director for the American Cancer Society in Austin, said the riders formed two groups: One rode up the West Coast through the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and the other traveled north along the Rocky Mountains.

"The Sierra group rode about 4,563 miles, and the Rocky Mountain group rode about 4,848 miles," Hogan said. "On July 28, they met in Whitehorse, Yukon, and have been riding as one group since then."

After arriving in Anchorage, they had a celebration barbecue with Texas Exes. According to the Texas 4000 Web site, the group has raised \$188,225.

"Originally they hoped to raise \$180,000 -- \$100,000 for the society and the rest for expenses -- but people have been so generous along the way," Hogan said. "They also expected their expenses to be about \$80,000, but they only used about \$60,000."

Hogan said the donations will benefit Austin-area residents, paying for research, transportation for cancer patients, local support groups and services such as a 24-hour help line.

Dan Haberberger, a senior majoring in electrical engineering, said his mom was diagnosed with colon cancer about a year and a half ago.

"Luckily she caught it through early detection, so the doctors were able to remove it," Haberberger said. "Through this ride, we're trying to spread knowledge about diseases like that and others."

Haberberger said the journey has been amazing.

"Even though the ride has been intense, it's been fun," he said. "I think to myself, this is one summer that I don't have to work or go to school. How many times will I get a summer like this?"

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