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For more information on the AIDS/LifeCycle event visit www.aidslifecycle.org

Thom Pelk Helped Fight AIDS/HIV During San Francisco to L.A. Ride

By SHANTAY IOSIA

(July 22, 2004) For Metro's Thom Pelk, the battle against AIDS/HIV was fought on the road.

Dressed in his armor of colorful spandex and equipped with the essential liquids, the Crossroads Depot Division 2 transportation manager mounted his elaborate bicycle and headed for the battlefield.

Beginning at the University of San Francisco, June 6, Pelk knew one thing for certain when he entered the third annual AIDS/Lifecycle fundraising event; he would arrive at Dodger stadium seven days and 585 miles later. What lay between remained uncertain, yet his goal was simple. Just ride.

After watching a documentary about the epidemic of AIDS/HIV, Pelk considered participating in the LifeCycle ride.

Once he committed himself to the philanthropic event, nothing could deter his path. He would join the 1,200 cyclists in their journey along the coast. The only obstruction was a minimum donation of \$2,500.

Reluctant to request donations

< Crossroads Depot Division Transportation manager Thom Pelk reaches halfway point on the AIDS/Lifecycle Ride June 9.

"This experience has and will continue to have an impact on my life. It was made possible by many of my fellow employees here at MTA. From the operators at Division 2 who collected and donated \$300, Gateway staff, Sector staff, Div 2 Assistant Managers and TOS staff. I truly am grateful. You were all with me on this journey...somebody pass the Deep Heat!!" -- Thom Pelk

The riders were required to raise the money before they could register to ride in the war against AIDS/HIV. Pelk was reluctant to request donations. "I expected to pay about \$1,000."

But, support from family, friends and colleagues put him over the minimum amount to participate. His daughter, Megen, 25, who lives in Seattle, and his son, Jakob, 29, who is a firefighter in the Bay area, collected donations for their father's cause.

His wife, Lynette, who works at Boeing, also gathered large contributions from friends and generous patrons. However, Pelk says it was the assistance from the Division 2 operators and many other MTA employees that really made a difference.

"[The Division 2 operators] wanted to have a barbecue and have all the proceeds go toward the ride, but I just couldn't lose any of the operators to make it happen," he says. "So one Friday, they passed around the hat." The operators donated \$300 to the cause and put Pelk well into the qualifying range to ride.

It wasn't until the day of the event that he realized the magnitude of what he was involved in. He kept a journal along the way to log the details of his experience.

"I see the trucks lined up to receive luggage, people in bright spandex outfits and helmets, cleats clanging on the asphalt. It's Showtime!" he wrote. "I am about to do what I've been talking about, thinking about, and training for, for the past five months."



- Richard Simmons impersonators enlivened the LifeCycle riders' camp on the road one evening.

Bitter reality check

Crowds cheered the riders along the early part of the route through Golden Gate Park, but otherwise first day was a bitter reality check for Pelk. He had underestimated the physical demands of the ride. "[San Francisco] has hills that we don't know. I didn't visualize those hills."

Each day brought new adventures and, like any battle, there were casualties and injuries. "There were spills, falls, broken bones and the walking wounded," he says. A semi-truck hit a rider and a trailed boat struck another.

There were also moments of trial, Pelk says, but when he wanted to give up, he dug deeper and thought about his parents, his cats that died or the MTA employees who contributed to this cause.

Pelk completed his journey within the top 2 percent of the participants and says it has left lasting imprints.

Although the ride is over, the war to save lives is far from complete. The war against cancer, the war against diabetes, and Pelk's next battle he prepares for, the war against Multiple Sclerosis, continues to claim lives.

"I highly encourage anyone who has contemplated such an ordeal to consider participating in an upcoming event. You may wonder what you have gotten yourself into during the course of the ride. But once you have completed the journey I can guarantee that you will have memories that will last a lifetime, and an incredible sense of accomplishment."

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