

Las Sendas Up Close

Bringing neighbors closer to their community

October 2011

Ride for Semper Fi Boosts Awareness for Injured Marines

By AnnElise Makin

The Ride for Semper Fi is on again, and on Oct. 12, some 65 cyclists, including recovering Marines veterans, will set out on another Tour de California, from Scottsdale to Sea World.

In its fourth year, the Ride for Semper Fi has raised a total of \$750,000 for the Injured Marines Fund. Last year, sponsorships and donations totaled \$250,000, far exceeding the goal of \$177,500, based on the birth year of the Marine Corps, 1775.

John Greenway, from Las Sendas, chairperson and co-founder of the Ride, is coordinating a million little pieces, from the phone and the computer. He can't wait to get his bike on the road. He has been practicing with the team every Saturday. "Each ride is another epic experience," John shared.

"The dynamics are different every time. You might have 50 individuals going into the ride, but, by the end of day two, all have been molded together into a cohesive group, everybody pulling for the same goal."



COMMITMENT DEEPLY ROOTED IN DNA

The idea for the Ride for Semper Fi sparked off a few years ago, when John attended his nephew's Marines boot camp commencement ceremony in San Diego. John was deeply moved by the young soldiers' willingness to risk life and limb for their country. He wanted to support this kind of valor. Lieutenant Colonel Paul Thompson, an Air Force reservist and active commercial pilot, from Las Sendas, who has flown well over a hundred MEDEVAC volunteer missions from Iraq and Afghanistan, was among the first to join the Ride for Semper Fi.

Match those two activists with DNA Cycle shop owner Don Eldridge, whose shop is located at Power and McKellips roads. "John came to me, when he and Paul had crafted the idea, trying to get 20 riders together to raise \$20,000," Don recalled. "Sure enough, we raised almost \$80,000 that first year." Since then, this key promoter also has served as versatile mechanic on all trips, hauling along chains, brake pads and many other supplies. He has donated a set of new tires for every rider each time to last the full 430-mile distance.

SIGNIFICANT INCREASE OF AWARENESS

Last year, the Semper Fi riders recorded yet another significant jolt of awareness themselves. A young Marine,

Angel Gomez, rode with the group, even though he was still recovering from a head injury, the result of an improvised explosive device in Iraq.

"Doctors didn't give Angel much hope," said John. "When he



woke up from the coma, he had to learn to walk and talk again." But, through his admirable resilience, Angel eventually mastered enough coordination to even ride a bike.

Angel recovered, but to a degree, the cyclists realized. Although he seemed to handle the bicycle well enough, he did not have enough motor control to eat or drink while cycling. He could not risk releasing his grip off the handle bar.

"It was one of the most touching things I have ever experienced," John reported. "The riders next to him started patting Angel's back to add a little push, other friends gave him water, fed him and took care of him."

In that sense, the Ride for Semper Fi should not be mistaken for a race, says John. "We ride as a unit, like in the military. Leave no one behind."

INSPIRATIONS FROM THE ROAD

Every Ride has generated countless memories. Last year, on the fourth day, the Patriot Riders joined the Arizonans on the last leg.

"This group usually escorts military funerals on their own dime," John said. "One man's necklace had a dog tag memorabilia for every military funeral he had attended. That touched me in a special way. They made sure we got to Sea World."

For the Ride to succeed, many helping hands are required. John's whole family, wife, Kelly, and the children, Austin, age 17, McKenzie, age 14, and Jack, 11 years old, truck along in support vehicles, providing food, fixing water bottles and looking after the comfort of the riders. Many a cyclist's family joins the convoy in vans, trucks and motor homes.

Among the crew, Wesley, age 8, and Nick, age 5, are probably "the hardest working boys you'll ever meet," John said. They get up at 4 o'clock in the morning to help their grandpa, Larry Hummel, hand out water bottles at the Saturday practice rides.

The Ride for Semper Fi has had a profound impact on the junior high-age and high school-age support crew. "These kids are learning the meaning of real

sacrifice and the importance of giving back while being part of a bigger cause," John said. ■

If you would like to contribute to the mission of the Ride for Semper Fi (Injured Marines Fund), you can still make a donation through the Web site at www.ride430.com.

JILL KISTNER WHY A MOTHER RIDES FOR SEMPER FI

Jill Kistner and her husband, David, from Phoenix, have participated in the Ride for Semper Fi four years in a row. David steps in the pedals, while Jill steps on the gas of the cycle van, ever so careful as not to pass the riders. The Kistners' oldest son Ryan—they have four boys—retired from the Army two years ago. He was deployed to Iraq three times. Ryan, now living in Dallas with his family and working for Walmart, experienced severe PTSD, but did not get the help he needed. So this mother decided to do something about it.

"My son has severe PTSD, which is really hard for me to talk about. He left as my son and came back a totally different person. He experienced a lot, but does not talk to me about it. He has frequent nightmares and breakdowns. They put him in therapy with civilians, those doctors not knowing what PTSD was. Finally, they took him to the VA.

My youngest son also was thinking of joining the service, but my husband said, 'No, you are not doing this to your mom, too!'

We drive behind the riders, at 18 miles an hour. There is not a lot of support by people on the road. We have been called all kinds of names and flipped off. Once a man got out of his truck and started beating on my door.

This happened although we fly huge flags, and all our boys are in red, white and blue jerseys, clearly marked. On the other hand, a lot of towns celebrate the day we come through.

We have met a lot of incredible people. Our cyclists ride for their nephews, sons or friends. I wish more people got involved. The kids are out there, helping their dads and moms. It gives them a lot of pride to be part of this.

My husband and I are the oldest people on the trip. My husband says, 'This is the last year I am riding,' but it's hard to tell John no. These 3.5 days, from beginning to end, are always very emotional for all of us."



THE RIDE FOR SEMPER FI EXPERIENCE

"The Ride for Semper Fi is not just a bike ride. What starts out as such turns into a journey to test yourself physically and mentally."

John Greenway, Chairman, The Ride for Semper Fi

"My most memorable impression was watching recovering injured Marines join the ride. We all become team members. This ride is life changing. One injured soldier, an inspirational young man, went ahead and opened his own bike shop."

Don Eldridge, Owner, DNA Cycle

"The Ride for Semper Fi helps to provide hope for injured heroes. Hope breeds determination, determination leads to accomplishment, and accomplishment produces healing."

Major Tres Smith, Marine Corps,
Distinguished Flying Cross Hero

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In This Issue

Reed Chiropractic	3	Market Report	8
Short Sales	4	Self Development Charter	9
Dessert Showdown	5	Las Sendas History Project	10
Empty Bowls Events	6	Service Directory	15