

I would ride 500 miles – or more

Three thousand people participated in this year's California AIDSride to raise money for AIDS/HIV research. Starting in San Francisco, they cycled 575 miles and reached Los Angeles seven days later. Participant **BRIAN STRICKER** explains what drove him.

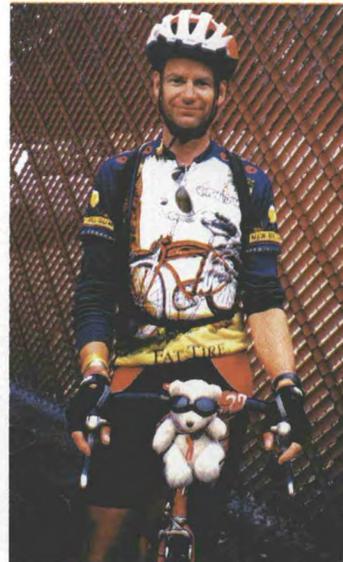


photo: Diane Livoti

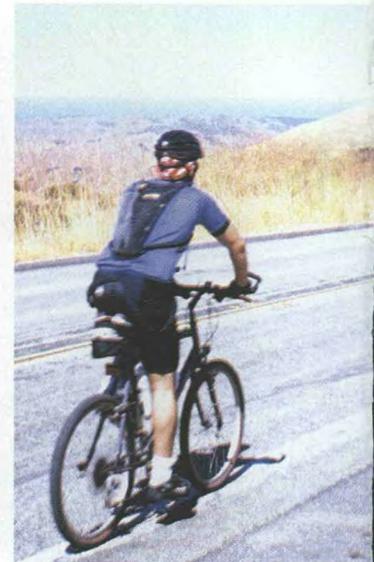
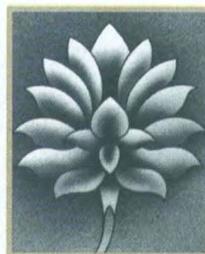


photo: Brian Stricker

To date, 17 million people in sub-Saharan Africa have died of the AIDS virus, 3.7 million of them children. Twenty-five million more are currently infected. In Botswana, 36 per cent of the adult population is infected – one third of the country; in other countries, one in every four adults is HIV positive. Worldwide, 36 million adults and children are living with HIV/AIDS. I can't pretend that what is going on in Africa, etc., has nothing to do with me – because it does.

The virus has also touched my life in a personal way. In 1997, my friend Nanette Sheets died of AIDS after an eight-year battle. Working tirelessly to share her story with others, who might learn from her mistake, she spoke to endless numbers of teenagers about choice and personal responsibility, gave many other public talks and appeared in a video documentary. I learnt that the only gift we can ever give to someone else is of ourselves, and that it is this willingness that makes us worthy of our precious human lives.

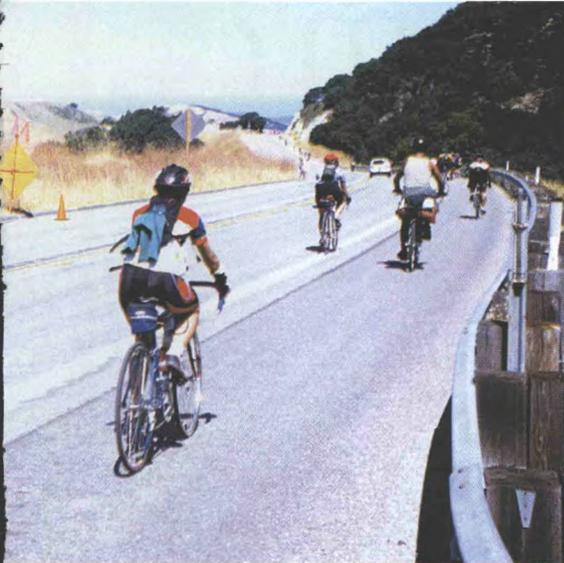


We cyclists in this great bicycle journey from San Francisco to Los Angeles were a diverse bunch united in our intention to support one another and to change a piece of the world in the process. Some of the real heroes in our group included a 70-year-old woman, who rode every foot of the journey without assistance,

and a man without legs, who rode the entire distance on a special cycle propelled with his arms. Most moving for me though were the hundreds of HIV-positive riders who were living proof that being a “victim” is truly just a label.

After the first couple of days, our journey took on a certain rhythm: up at 5:30A.M., standing in line at the porta-johns, packing up gear and tents, breakfast, butt-lube at the medical tent, chain-lube at the bike repair tent, a blessing at the gate from the Chicken Lady (a drag queen named for the stuffed chicken he/she always carried who – in a quirky way – was the heart and soul of the AIDSride), and then off for another day in the saddle.

Our riding often began with a slow crawl out of the city where we had spent the previous night (traffic lights, commuter traffic, hundreds of AIDSriders all bunched together), but once we reached the city limits, the pace picked up and we became a long, thin line of motion: zooming along the edge of the Pacific Ocean, or cranking through farmland inhaling the fragrance of strawberries or artichokes, struggling up long, steep hills with burning thighs or flying down the other side like two-wheeled meteors.



Along the Pacific Coast Highway

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We encountered supporters everywhere we went: people next to the road holding signs and cheering us on in the middle-of-nowhere, entire classrooms of children shouting encouragement and lining up to get high-fives from the riders, “angels of mercy” strategically placed at the roadside with garden hoses on those days when the mercury hovered around 100° F, and so on. Within the group as well, support for one another was almost overwhelming.

Every 15 miles or so we were availed with a Pit Stop – a sort of “cyclist’s oasis” where everything from Gatorade and butt-balm to tattoos and nail-polish to Luna Bars and porta-johns were available for one’s dining or decorating or purging (or medicating) enjoyment. “Hydrate, urinate, and lubricate” as the mantra went. And then of course there was lunch!

By the end of the day, exhaustion set in for most of us, and it became a matter of putting our heads down and just grinding out the remaining miles. Once at camp, we would park our bikes, retrieve our gear and head for the showers. After dinner and a bit of socializing, it was bed by 9:00 or 9:30 PM.

Our ride reached a joyful and tearful conclusion on 9 June in LA. We flew into town riding a wave of elation – cheering, singing, and dodging traffic until we pulled up to the Coliseum where we parked our bikes and awaited the arrival of the rest of our fellow cyclists. Once gathered, we rode a “victory lap” around the outside of the Coliseum to a stage by the front entrance where we were welcomed by thousands of people.

There were fireworks and speeches, and a collective wonderment at what we’d just done.

And then suddenly it was over. Each of us found ourselves being pushed or pulled back into the world that we’d started in, a world which does not revolve around the bicycle and does not involve sleeping in tents or showering in trucks, a world which is perhaps a little less kind than the one we had just created on the road from San Francisco to LA.

I feel such gratitude for having been able to participate in something so outrageously positive – an act of courage, willpower and kindness on the part of riders, crew members, supporters and donors – in the face of unthinkable personal and planetary suffering.

Through AIDSride 2001, \$US11.8 million was raised for life-sustaining services (hospice care, etc.) provided by the San Francisco AIDS Foundation and the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center. See www.aidsride.org for more information and to register for AIDSride 2002: www.BeThePeople.com ☸

Brian Stricker lives in Lake Tahoe, CA. He is a clinical social worker, working mostly with troubled adolescents, often in wilderness settings. Two years ago, after a failed romantic relationship (# 562) and a five-year stint running a residential treatment program for adjudicated teenage boys, he took a six-month break and headed for Asia – primarily to visit Mt. Kailash in Tibet and receive its blessings. Six weeks later he attended the fabled November course at Kopan Monastery in Kathmandu, at the end of which he took refuge with Lama Zopa Rinpoche – “And nothing has been the same since, I’m happy to report!”