

PLUS:

Meet the 2016 Echo Readers'
Choice Award winners

A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a rainbow-colored cycling cap and a grey and blue cycling jersey with 'SAN FRANCISCO' and 'LOS ANGELES' on the sleeves, and 'SF-LA Ride 545' on the front. He is standing outdoors with a blurred background of a bicycle and trees.

Beyond the Finish Line

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to raise HIV/AIDS awareness



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By Art Matori

It was three years ago that Rickie Rosales was preparing for his first AIDS/LifeCycle, a 545-mile bike ride geared toward raising money and awareness for HIV/AIDS. The fight against this epidemic was reason enough for him to push through to the finish line – he was already determined.

A poignant epiphany, however, came not with fatigued muscles, blown-out knees nor the persistent saddle sores that accompany long-distance cycling. It was hearing one of his best friends had been living with HIV that brought the ride's purpose into excruciating focus.

"When he found out I was doing the ride, then he told me," said Rosales, a 34-year-old Phoenix resident who, with his husband, is raising a young son. "That was kind of like a flooring moment for me. I had no idea he had HIV and I had no idea [it] was this close."

Maybe that explains why three years

later he is, once again, preparing to hop on his bike for a long ride down the California coast, from San Francisco to Los Angeles.

One look at Rosales, with his lithe frame, and you can tell he's pretty fit. But the former marathon runner admitted with a laugh that he was hardly prepared when he did AIDS/LifeCycle the first time, which ultimately left him with a nearly debilitating case of patellofemoral pain syndrome, or runner's knee.

"I hadn't cycled since I was in college. And 'cycling' wasn't the word," he remembered. "I rode my bicycle from my dorm room to class. And that was not even a mile. I had to re-learn how to ride my bike."

HANDS-ON ACTIVISM

Rosales is gearing up to participate in the 2016 AIDS/LifeCycle, which takes place June 5 through June 11, with an average of 80 miles on each stage of the seven-day,

545-mile ride. Stops include Santa Cruz, Paso Robles, Lompoc and Ventura, Calif.

He's one of about 60 participating cyclists from Arizona, according to AIDS/LifeCycle staff, with thousands more coming from around the world.

"Cyclists and roadies from all parts of the world, such as Australia, China and Russia, have participated in AIDS/LifeCycle," explained AIDS/LifeCycle senior director Greg Sroda. "Last year, participants came from 20 foreign countries and nearly every U.S. state. We expect the same tremendous global turnout this year."

Participating cyclists secure sponsorships, with the funds going to the Los Angeles LGBT Center and the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, whose stated mission is reducing new HIV infections and improving the quality of life for people living with HIV/AIDS. For Rosales, it's a brand of activism with a distinctly hands-on feel.

"It's something I can do. I know I can physically ride," he explained. "There's a lot of organizations – not knocking any

specific one; I will support them – but I don't know where the money goes.

"By talking to the agencies that are actually using it and seeing the people who actually get help, I feel like I'm able to contribute to doing something, instead of just sitting at a table for an hour and handing out flyers."

Last year, some 3,200 riders raised more than \$15.5 million, a single-year record. Throughout the past 14 years, AIDS/LifeCycle has raised more than \$146 million, but Sroda added that the push for funding and increased awareness is still critical.

"It's easy for people to think that HIV/AIDS is no longer a problem. Medications have come a long way, and people are living longer, healthier lives," Sroda said. "We ride to raise awareness and knowledge about HIV/AIDS among our participants, their donors, and the general public. We ride because – in the current economy – our agencies need these funds more than ever. We ride because AIDS is not over."

OPENING A DIALOGUE

The San Francisco-to-Los Angeles route is especially relevant because, according to AIDS/LifeCycle, nearly one in 10 HIV-infected Americans reside in California – second only to New York. According to the organization, some 7,000 new infections will occur this year in California alone.

In terms Arizonans might better understand, that's close to the entire population of Globe, Ariz. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2013 an estimated 749 adults and adolescents were diagnosed with HIV in Arizona, putting it 18th among states that year.

In Arizona, the non-profit Aunt Rita's Foundation serves a similar role as the organizations that put on AIDS/LifeCycle, sponsoring events such as the AIDS Walk Arizona & 5K Run in downtown Phoenix.

HIV/AIDS is still an epidemic, executive director Glen Spencer bluntly points out, adding that the fight here isn't going as well as it might in other states where education is more effective.

"In terms of reducing new infections, we're losing the battle. Period," Spencer said. "I don't know if everyone is aware and appreciates that, while some cities and states are doing a good job, we're just not one of them."

Arizona might differ from California, he added, in the way we approach the topic, especially with young people.

"Where I think Arizona is missing an opportunity is to more honestly and overtly educate our youth, our teenagers, about the problem," Spencer explained. "Teaching abstinence only ... I mean, look, I'm not an expert on education, but I haven't seen any promising statistics."

Yet some of Rosales' comments suggest Arizona riders might, at least, be sparking meaningful discussions back home.

"I didn't think I knew people who were actually affected by [HIV/AIDS] until

people started pledging and then telling me why they're pledging," he said. "And the people they knew, I knew. It opened a dialogue."

That conversation, Rosales said, continued as he met a few HIV-infected cyclists on the ride.

THE REST OF THE RIDE

The event itself is friendly and non-competitive in nature, Rosales explained. If riders struggle to complete a phase, a "sag bus" is available to drive them until they're able to continue. Between phases, cyclists stay at campgrounds, with FedEx delivering luggage between stops.

One of Rosales' favorite parts of AIDS/LifeCycle route is rolling into Lompoc, Calif., a small, picturesque town of about 42,000 in Santa Barbara County, nestled in the valley of the Santa Ynez River.

"It's kind of like a parade. They're waiting for you," Rosales said of Lompoc residents eager to greet riders.

Lompoc Mayor Bob Lingl confirms AIDS/LifeCycle is quite the event in his community and added that residents and visiting cyclists get along well as the population of his small town temporarily swells.

"Our community has always welcomed them with open arms, with local citizens standing on street corners cheering them on as they enter our city," Lingl said. "The local residents who have homes around the park where the riders spend the



Photos by Fernando Hernández.

night always comment on how polite and considerate the riders are."

Perhaps this sense of community pushed Rosales to complete his inaugural ride, despite his knee injury. Looking back on it now, Rosales laughs, admitting he overworked his knee because he wasn't confident shifting into lower gears, so he overworked to get up hills.

There were, in fact, quite a few things he wishes he knew then. But, ahead of his second AIDS/LifeCycle, he's feeling more confident than ever.

Succumb to the blown-out knee? Surrender to the blisters? Jump on that sag bus and ride it out in comfort? No way. "I'm not gonna ride a bus for the rest of this ride," he concluded.

For more information on AIDS/LifeCycle, visit aidslifecycle.org.

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

If you're participating in the 2016 AIDS/LifeCycle, Echo wants to hear from you! Share your story and photos with us by emailing editor@echomag.com or using #EchoMagAZ on social media.

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