



Positive TRACTION

THIS TIME, IT'S NOT ABOUT HIM

Matt Reynolds is riding his bike for AIDS again – and he will be flying a Pos Peds flag with pride

By PAUL SERCHIA

Seven AIDS rides and six years have passed since the last time that **Matthew Reynolds** got on a bicycle to raise funds for the San Francisco AIDS Foundation to fight AIDS. In 2001, Matt participated in California AIDS Ride 8 as a rider and fund-raiser. Then 23 years old, Matt learned that he was HIV-positive while he was being treated for substance use, and in recovery.

Dealing with the consequences of addiction on their own is a lot for someone to handle. Confronting an HIV diagnosis at the same time left Matt feeling “sucker-punched,” he said.

In the course of a few years, Matt went from being “a little Valley boy with a pretty decent but sheltered life” to becoming a substance abuser infected with both HIV and chronic hepatitis B.

Signing up for CAR 8, Matt related, was “a way for me to feel OK about something that I was ashamed about.” Doing the ride, Matt thought, would “turn a tragedy into something positive.”

Surrounded by support, yet feeling alone

As a resident of San Francisco, Matt knew that he was surrounded by abundant resources for people with HIV. “But I felt strangely isolated,” Matt said. “I felt like I was having to deal with this by myself. My friends would say to me, ‘I’m really sorry, I feel for you,’ but it felt like there was a level of disconnect.”

Matt thought that CAR 8 might provide a path out of that isolation. But the ride did not begin as the idyllic experience that Matt hoped it might be. And it almost did not happen at all, when Matt fell \$200 short of the fund-raising minimum to participate,



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kicks on Route 66 –and beyond**

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**On the back page
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Doing ALC for others this time

From front page

despite having approached all of his relatives to explain his situation and to ask them to support his involvement on the ride.

"To actually have to pay to go on the ride was really disheartening," Matt said. "I guess I felt that I had not gotten the kind of response that I was expecting."

At the orientation on the eve of the ride, Matt encountered a table for Positive Pedalers riders and roadies.

"I was hesitant to sign up, to be a part of it," Matt recalls. "The level of shame that I felt at that time was that significant."

Matt did sign up eventually. "They gave me the little flag to put on the back of my bike. I was even more hesitant about that. I definitely had a difficult time with riding as a Positive Pedaler."

In the dining tent on one evening of the ride, among a group of hundreds of riders and roadies, Matt recalls HIV-positive riders being invited to come forward for a group photograph. Despite the misgivings he felt at being seen and identified as a person living with HIV, Matt opted to join the other HIV-positive riders and roadies in the photograph.

"As we started to line up, everyone in the tent stood up—people who weren't infected, who weren't getting their picture taken, all of the HIV-negative people doing the ride—out of support for those who had come forward. They gave us a standing ovation! At 23, and newly diagnosed, it brought me to tears. It was a really powerful experience. I never felt so much comfort."

At that moment, Matt felt the heavy sense of isolation that he felt surrounding his HIV diagnosis suddenly disappearing "I felt like everything was going to be OK," he says.

"I was not doing this alone."

Matt left Fort Mason on the first day of CAR 8 as someone who harbored reluctance about mounting a small Positive Pedaler flag on his bicycle. By the time that the ride concluded at the Coliseum in Los Angeles seven days later, Matt was proud to publicly identify himself as

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being a person with HIV. He was even being interviewed and filmed for a documentary on the ride.

Since his CAR 8 experience, Matt has been able to come to grips with living with HIV and has years of sobriety under his belt. While his own situation is under control, he is disturbed by the ongoing impact of HIV, particularly how substance use continues to feed the spread of infection.

Last year, Matt decided that it was time to return to riding his bicycle to raise funds for AIDS.

This time around, Matt is approaching the ride with courage and confidence. Not only does Matt know that he is no longer alone, he has reached out to others and helped to form a small AIDS/LifeCycle family within his sobriety network.

"I'm doing the ride with five other people who I am really good friends with," Matt explained. "I'm the only one who is HIV-positive and I know that they care about this as much as I do."

"There's a 19-year-old who's doing [AIDS/LifeCycle]

with me," Matt continued.

"He's not HIV-positive, and it just floors me. When I was 19, I wasn't necessarily stuck on myself but I wasn't thinking globally. To have a 19-year-old 'little brother,' taking up the fight when it doesn't affect people he knows yet—it's actually a beautiful thing."

Matt knows that he will not be digging into his pockets on the day before the ride to reach the fund-raising minimum. As this article was being prepared for publication, Matt was just a few dollars shy of the minimum—and he still has nearly three months to continue to solicit donations for the San Francisco AIDS Foundation and reach the \$4,000 goal he has established for himself.

"I just mentioned [AIDS/LifeCycle] to somebody and they contributed \$1,000," Matt said. "Most of my donations are word-of-mouth. I attach my information to my e-mail signature and people keep giving money. It's a great feeling to see that people still care."

The first time Matt embarked on an AIDS ride, he was seeking strength from the community to lift himself up. This time, he explained, the tables are turned.

"The first ride was about me, my fears of dying, about doing something that I should be ashamed of," he said. "This year is different. Even in asking people for money, it's 'get out of yourself, Matt; it's not about you.' It's about a cause. It's about self-respect."

And Matt has signed up as a member of Positive Pedalers, describing himself as "a proud and happy HIV-positive man."

"I don't know what that will translate into by the end of the ride," he said. "But I'm certain it will be a completely different experience than it was the first time."

Matt Reynolds is San Francisco Rider #4290.



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POSITIVE TRACTION is the free monthly newsletter for **Positive Pedalers**.

Positive Pedalers is a group of people living with HIV/AIDS committed to eliminating the stigma of disease through our positive public example.

Visit www.pospeds.org for information and to become a Positive Pedaler.

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nathan.menard@sbcglobal.net

WILFREDO ORTIZ

wortiz8485@aol.com

ROSS PAPISH

rosspapish@aol.com

SEAN RAY

seanray@comcast.net

GABRIEL ROCHA

gabo291969@yahoo.com

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pserschia@sbcglobal.net

BEAU THOMSON

mwtbeau@hotmail.com

Emeritus Members

DALE FREEMAN

dcflaw@pacbell.net

BOB KATZ

bobkatz96@aol.com

POSITIVE TRACTION team

DAVID DUNCAN

BOB KATZ

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