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Massachusetts & Connecticut

June 2017

Volume 3 · Issue 7

golocalmagazines.com



BUILT ON FAMILY

SECOND CHANCE RANCH

A PEACHY PLACE TO BE

PEDAL FOR PATIENTS
SEVEN LAKES RIDE

PEDAL

FOR PATIENTS

Seven Lakes Ride



Inspiration comes in many forms: nature, art, kindness, love, loss. It's being filled with the urge or ability to do or feel something; from the Latin word *inspirare* is to 'breathe or blow into.' The implication is particularly fitting for Pete LaValley, a Stafford Springs native and cyclist who has used his personal experiences to create one very powerful event.

AMBER WAKLEY
JACQUELINE M. SIDOR,
JMS ART & PHOTO



Pete's an inconspicuous collector; gathering specific pieces of his life to create a dynamic puzzle that – when put together – forms one big, beautiful picture. Thirty years ago Pete was recently married, worked for the town of Stafford and had a passion for mountain biking. Things were good, but just six months after marriage, his wife Lisa became ill; she was diagnosed with kidney disease.

“She lived for about 10 years with dialysis, had a kidney transplant – it didn't work – and went back on dialysis,” Pete shares. “But within that time we traveled, made possible by her health care team. They would ship dialysis equipment to destinations across the country – the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone and Martha's Vineyard. She passed away in her early 30s and afterward I decided I want to do that – to help someone with their quality of life and to give them the opportunity she had.”

Inspired, Pete decided to change careers in his late 30s, going from plowing local roads to pursuing a clinical education in radiation therapy. He started taking classes – at night, over the

summer and during his vacation time. He saved – and saved and saved – until he had enough to go to school full-time. With the unconditional support of his wife, Paula, he became a Radiation Therapist, using a linear accelerator device to administer treatments to patients with cancer and other diseases.

He now works for Hartford Hospital at the Eastern Connecticut Cancer Institute in Manchester, Connecticut. But working in a state-of-the-art lab with highly specialized machines is just one part of the job for Pete. Each day Pete instills trust and hope to people struggling against disease, particularly cancer patients.

“Although I'm working in the health care field – a very clinical, scientific and high tech environment – I see these people, sometimes every day for two months and we grow this connection. I see them every day, Monday through Friday, and really develop some strong bonds,” says Pete. “People are people.”

Working directly with patients Pete understands how a cancer diagnosis can shatter lives, but it was one patient that really struck a cord; he and Pete were the same age. As a carpenter he was laid off from work, lost his medical benefits, home, car and subsequently moved in with his elderly father. He struggled to find money for medications and food.

“I've seen a lot of things and it's mindboggling how peoples' lives really change when they have to start treatments,” says Pete. “They work their whole life then get this disease that is just devastating – health wise and financially. It's heartbreaking to see happen. “That could very well be me or someone in my family. He – and others – just really moved me to try and help somehow.”

Inspired, the life of the Seven Lakes Ride began, a non-competitive charity cycling event to aid patients in need of financial respite. The goal is to raise money through sponsorships, donations and participant registrations. Each contribution helps to ease the

JOHN SATTAR AND PETE LAVALLEY





stresses cancer patients face, like making ends meet, so they can concentrate on beating their disease. Proceeds help patients subsidize the cost of medications, groceries, nutritional supplements, transportation and home heating fuel – anything they need.

As member of Nerac Earth Cycling Club, a Tolland based group of mountain and road riders of all levels – Pete wasn't alone in his endeavors. Based in Tolland, Connecticut Nerac Earth operates as a nonprofit with 75 members actively supporting the sport of bicycle riding in the community. They lead rides for cyclists of all ages and skill levels, work to improve the trails in our area, share biking knowledge and skills with new cyclists, and recruit new cyclists into the sport. When Pete proposed the idea of a charity ride five years ago, they were ready to jump on board.

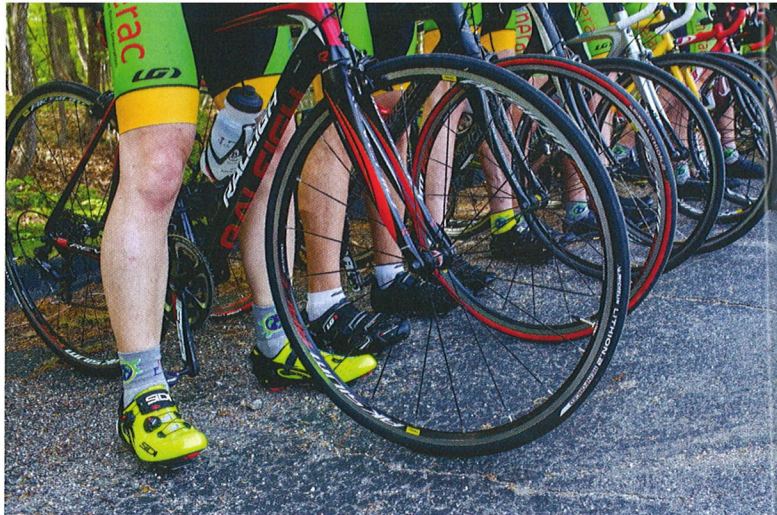
"Cyclists are huge hearted people who are really friendly with one another; it's a great community," says Pete. "I think that's the big take home – if you need help, they'll give you a hand."

"The cycling community is very caring and generous and I am grateful that I can be a small part of it," says John, a longtime event volunteer and Nerac Earth Cycling Club member. "So many

riders come out and participate in fundraisers for causes that are close to their heart, all while doing something that they love."

Pete and the club work year-round, meticulously organizing each aspect of the ride. On Sunday, June 25 the morning light will greet riders, with registration starting at 7:00am. Beginning and ending at the Stafford High School there will be a 20, 25, 45 and 62-mile route to choose from. Each course is incredibly scenic and tranquil, offering riders quiet country roads through Stafford, Willington, Union, Ashford, Woodstock, Sturbridge, Holland, and Wales (dependent on selected route). Each course offers rest stops – approximately every 25 miles – equipped with food, drinks and water. Expertly planned, the marked course is a USA Cycling permitted event and primarily supported by local businesses and civilian groups.

The cycling fundraiser is beautifully synchronized with the realities of Pete's patients, as each endeavor requires strength, endurance and positive energy. Over the course of four years the Seven Lakes Ride has raised \$30,000 in which \$29,931 has been donated to 91 different families. Pete confers with hospital case-



workers and staff who communicate the needs of patients at the cancer center. Without hesitation, Pete writes a check for the requested amounts.

"Cancer touches so many families, mine included. I lost my father to melanoma cancer, while he was in his 50s and my father-in-law to pleural mesothelioma, more recently," says John. "I am glad that I, and my family, are able to do something positive for members of our community, something that can really make a difference in a person's life. It is so amazing to see cyclists (and non-cyclists) all come together for a common cause."

"I don't ask questions. I just write a check and enclose a blurb about how the money was raised," Pete says humbly. "I typically don't give the check in person, I would never want anyone to feel indebted. Some people are brought to tears from being in a rut they can't get out of and not knowing where to turn. Hopefully this helps."

He's seen the outcome of these donations and says it's truly touching. From innocent marker-written construction paper cards saying, "thank you for helping my mommy feel better," to letters sharing the Seven Lakes Ride contribution "was a blessing at a time most needed," Pete says this is what keeps him going. Often it's just a handshake or hug with a heartfelt thank you. It's also his patients who return 10 years later for a procedural fol-

low up. With them, they bring photos of new grandchildren and share milestone moments. This is why he's here.

Inspired by life's moments that have transpired in various forms since a young man, Pete just wants to make a difference in the lives of others. Behind him – in vibrant yellow state-of-the-art moisture wicking fabric – is a community of cyclists helping him go the distance.

"People often say my job is very sad – and it can be – but it's also very full. Yes, there are people that don't survive their treatment and it's very upsetting to me," Pete shares quietly. "But the ones that do – it's just so remarkable – the bond you develop with somebody. It's really the best cure. I just think of myself on that table and treat everyone with that same respect and compassion. You have to in order to help. If you treat people like that, their experience will be much better – and that's all I need."

The nonprofit event is always looking for monetary donations, in-kind contributions (like food for rest stops), and volunteer assistance, please visit sevenlakesride.com for details. The ride starts and ends at the Stafford High School (145 Orcuttville Road in Stafford Springs, CT) on Sunday, June 25, 2017. Registration: 7:00-9:30AM, Start Times: 62 mile 8:00AM, 45 mile 8:30AM, 25 mile 9:00AM, 20 mile 9:30AM. Rain or shine event! Registration fees vary \$25-\$35, see website or email neracearth@nerac.com for details.



