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FEATURES

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A bicycling challenge

Three Valley riders 'tour' Israel to aid Alyn Children's Hospital

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As the more than 350 bike riders approached the finish line, they were greeted by a large, raucous crowd. Hundreds of people lined the streets. Music was playing, though some of it was drowned out. Adults and children alike were rooting for their favorite riders, hoping to give them that last boost of energy needed to complete their journey.

"It worked," says Irwin Sheinbein, one of the riders. "Seeing all the kids, knowing we made a difference, was definitely a nice way to end the ride."

Phoenix residents Sheinbein, Dr. Rene Lucas and Rabbi Yakov Bronsteyn, a rabbi at Phoenix Community Kollel, were among the 350-plus riders who participated in the ninth annual Wheels of Love Alyn International Charity Bike Ride in Israel. The five-day, 300-mile ride, which took place Nov. 9-13, has raised more than \$7.5 million for Alyn Children's Hospital in the last three years alone.

Founded in 1932, Alyn Children's Hospital is a pediatric and adolescent rehabilitation center in Israel. The hospital accepts patients regardless of religion or ethnicity. Many patients are victims of terrorism, which means that in addition to general pediatric needs and rehabilitation, the hospital is also well-versed in treating terror-related injuries such as trauma, head injuries and burns.

Because the hospital is privately funded, it receives no automatic government funding and only partial reimbursement from the Israeli Health Funds and other referring agencies.

It is this predicament that spawned the idea for Wheels of Love in 2000. Alyn had been a beneficiary of the Norwood Ravenswood Israel Charity Bike Ride since 1997, but organizers canceled the ride in 2000 due to the violence in the Middle East. Undeterred, the 10 riders who were already set to ride on behalf of Alyn rode anyway, and the Alyn International Charity Bike Ride, better known as Wheels of Love, was born; more than \$65,000 was raised for the hospital that year. The following year had 48 riders, and in 2002 the number of participants rose to 107. In 2004, multiple routes were added and the number of participants rose once again, to 245. A challenge route was introduced in 2006, when nearly 400 participants raised more than \$2.5 million for Alyn.

According to the Alyn Hospital Web site, more than 75 percent of the money raised from Wheels of Love goes directly to the hospital.

The charity ride now has four routes that participants get to choose from: on-road, off-road, touring and challenge. Each course offers unique obstacles, with the challenge course catering to advanced riders.

Sheinbein, participating in Wheels of Love for the fourth consecutive year, chose the touring course this year. In previous years, he'd done the on-road course twice and the challenge course once. Those taking the touring course spend half their days riding and half sightseeing.

Bronsteyn and Lucas, both riding for the first time in this race, chose the challenge course. The pair was among the group of 50 that chose this route. According to Lucas, who rides his bike up to 40 miles per day six days a week, it lived up to its name.

"Extremely challenging," Lucas says. "At the end of each day's ride, nobody had any energy left. We just showered, ate and slept. Then we got up and did it all again."

This year's ride started and finished in Jerusalem. In between, riders passed by many of Israel's historically significant sites, including the Valley of Elah, where David slew Goliath; Sde Boker; Masada; and the Dead Sea. On the final day of the ride, all four groups met, riding the last leg of the journey to Alyn Hospital together.



Irwin Sheinbein, left, and Rene Lucas, who rode different courses during the Wheels of Love Alyn International Charity Bike Ride, reunited in Jerusalem after the final leg of the 300-mile trip.

Photo courtesy of Rene Lucas

For Lucas, a doctor whose area of practice includes orthopedics and rehabilitation, the ride meant as much professionally as it did personally. He wrote a blog about his experiences on the trip, with topics ranging from daily ride breakdowns to how he spent Shabbat in Israel. He also posted photos from the ride.

Alyn requires each rider to raise a minimum of \$2,000 to participate in Wheels of Love. Lucas and Bronsteyn combined to raise \$4,600.

"Just knowing what Alyn stands for, the patients they treat, the adverse conditions they deal with, really helped motivate me," Lucas says.

The riders also spoke fondly about the camaraderie a trip such as Wheels of Love can foster.

"There are a few regulars_ such as myself," Sheinbein says. "In fact, I met my CPA, who lives in Philadelphia, on one of these trips, and we keep in touch on a regular basis."

"The camaraderie among the riders was great, because we all rode and struggled through the same challenges of the ride," Lucas says.

Donations for the 2008 Wheels of Love are still being accepted on behalf of the riders. Visit alynride.org. Click "Donate Online." From there, choose "Donate to Rider" and fill out the necessary information.

Rene Lucas' blog is online at renelucas.com/blog.