

Conquering AIDS One Mile at a Time

Melanie S. Hatter



Pit Stop - Day 2

I can't count the number of moments before the ride when I thought I must be crazy to spend four days cycling through North Carolina, Virginia and the District of Columbia. It was the year I turned 35 and I was eager to hit my mid-30 point having done something spectacular. After hearing a co-worker recount his experience in the event and a few months of careful thought, I decided to do it. It would be a great challenge, I thought. But it was more than that, it was life altering.

According to the Center for Disease Control, between 1995 and 2000 about 11,600 cases of AIDS have been diagnosed in women. I was stunned to discover that in 1999 black women represented 63 percent of the population living with AIDS. As a black woman, I had to do my part for the cause. I spent five months riding my bike through the hills of Maryland and asking friends, coworkers and family members to sponsor me - asking people for money was as daunting as the training. The additional challenge, as a mother, was finding a babysitter every weekend and not feeling guilty for cycling instead of being with my 8-year-old son. I just hoped he would learn the importance of helping those in need.

I trained and trained. It was so hard. On one training ride, I found myself standing on a hill, on the side of a country road in tears because my legs couldn't push the pedals anymore. I was worn out and sore. I felt then I would never complete the AIDS Ride, but I resolved to do my best. I continued the training. I cycled in the rain and the cold - one day was so cold that there were snowflakes in the air. Each weekend brought more miles and bigger hills. It was exhausting.

Before we began the ride, the organizers encouraged us to practice random acts of kindness, and that's exactly what happened. But not only did these acts of kindness occur between riders and crew, they also came from the communities we rode through. People sprayed us with water and stood at the side of the road dishing out fruit and Popsicles. Everyone came together to push each other along, either literally or figuratively with a word, or even a song. At the top of a tough climb on the second day three women cyclists were singing "Climb Every Mountain." Their voices were surprisingly in tune for having just ridden their bikes to the top and were a delight to me. I was breathless and struggling to get there.

The riders came in all shapes and sizes, all races and shades, and there were

teams that wore identifying shirts. The Brother to Brother Sister to Sister United team was impressive in its African colors, but the team I most admired was the Positive Peddlars - positive for their optimistic attitude and their HIV status. Many passed me on the road and I was humbled by their strength. Riders positive for HIV carried orange flags on their bikes.

I was determined to ride every mile without walking up hills or getting sagged (cyclist-speak for getting picked up by a car before ending the route). Doubt plagued me. In the last 10 years or more I hadn't cycled more than 12 miles. I had to pull out everything I had inside me to get through it. I discovered a determination inside myself I had previously only hoped was there.

My partner, Robert, an experienced cyclist who helped me train, stuck with me every mile. Just when I felt my legs weakening and unable to push another revolution, his hand was there at my back pushing me forward, encouraging me not to give up, despite his own suffering from blistered feet.

At one point, I spotted a lone rider at the bottom of an incline. His body wobbled slightly from side to side and his bike was moving slower than mine. I could tell that he was struggling, and so was I. My knees hurt, my behind throbbed, and my shoulders ached. I wanted to lie down on a soft mattress - even the roadside would have been fine. I was grumbling and complaining at having signed up for this torture and agony in the first place. Why did I think I could do this? As I got closer to the rider, whose name I discovered later was Keith, I realized he was cycling with two artificial legs from the knee down. I was instantly embarrassed and took back every complaint I had grumbled.

"You are truly amazing," I whispered to him as I came to his side.

"We're all amazing," he replied.

I was deeply touched by his effort, and his commitment only strengthened my resolve to keep going.

There were many moments that helped ease the strain. Pit stops loaded with nutritional food and drink and staffed with cheerful volunteers were placed every 15 to 20 miles along the route. It was at one of these pit stops I discovered the joy of sprawling on bags of ice - cyclists with aching limbs in need of a cool-down coveted the "ice couch." My knees ached so badly I thought I'd never walk again. Ibuprofen was my friend. The volunteers took my mind off the pain. And I was indeed in pain.

Everyone ached, and the concern for one another was powerful. It was an insular world where everyone helped one another with words of encouragement, tips and advice. Racial prejudices and homophobia didn't exist. We slept side by side in tents at night. We bathed in portable showers with steaming hot water and ate hot meals outdoors. We all reached our limits. We suffered and we triumphed together.

Cycling as one body into the nation's capital brought the tears that had threatened to flow so many times along the route. Hundreds of supporters on each side of Pennsylvania Avenue clapped and cheered at us. At me. Saying thanks for what we had achieved. Not until then did I realize I was stronger, physically and mentally, than I ever imagined I could be. There were those who called the cyclists heroes. I'm not sure I'd consider myself a hero. But it was the culmination of an emotional and exhilarating experience: I was part of something huge.

It was one of those experiences that's so profound, you don't fully grasp its significance until it's almost over. I had won. I had battled wind and rain during months of training. Beaten hills that came close to killing me. And most of all I conquered my own self-doubt. I wish I could remember the words coming from the loud speaker that June day in Washington, D.C. but I don't. All I remember are the tears and the fingers gripping one another and the emotion that rose so thickly in the sunshine I could feel it pressing me from all sides. Excitement.

Relief. Grief. And unadulterated joy bursting from 1,700 cyclists crowding Pennsylvania Avenue. And I was one of them. I had survived the AIDS Ride 5, a 330-mile bike ride from Raleigh, N.C. to Washington D.C., an annual event to raise money and awareness for people living with AIDS and HIV. It was not a race, but everyone who participated was a winner. I'm proud to say I rode every mile.

As one, we raised more than \$5 million and opened many hearts and minds to the fact that millions around the world have died and still are dying from the disease while many continue to live with its shadow. Each year, the money benefits Whitman Walker Clinic and Food & Friends, which provide services to those living with the disease in the Washington, D.C. area.

As much as the event was about me testing my resolve and physical ability, I discovered that it was more about people being kind and helping each other. Many of us were raising funds and awareness for a disease that affects people we'd never met. It was also an opportunity to help each other reach our fullest potentials as human beings. Hundreds of cyclists proved they could come together as one, with all their differences, and achieve something wonderful - a dedicated act of kindness. And I was one of them.

Melanie S. Hatter is the 2000 winner of the RomanticTales.com writing contest and her work has appeared in *Emerge* and *ACE Dialogue* magazines. She has completed a novel called *After the Rain*.

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