

Ticket to Ride

One woman puts the bike pedal to the metal, taking the ride of her life to fight AIDS.

TRACY DAUGHERTY COASTED HER BIKE INTO CAMP for her final stop of the day. She'd already paused to recharge three times—grabbing a snack at the morning rest stop, pumping air into her tires at lunch and stealing a few words of encouragement from volunteers later in the afternoon. After a much-needed shower and dinner, Daugherty, 49, headed to her tent to call it a night. To cover the remainder of the 560-mile course between Niagara Falls and Manhattan in the allotted seven days, she'd have to be up early to start all over again.

"Some people will stay up and talk about the day, but most collapse in bed," she said with a laugh.

The event, New York's Empire State AIDS Ride (empirestateaidsride.org), held this past August, is an annual fund-raiser for AIDS research that also benefits AIDS service organizations throughout the state. This year, riders and volunteers raised \$348,000; 82 percent of proceeds go directly to the beneficiaries. (The remainder covers overhead expenses.)

The Empire ride marked Daugherty's eighth bike-a-thon in 10 years. She has pedaled for AIDS everywhere from New York to Alaska in memory of her brother, Bret, who died of AIDS in 1995. After Bret's death, Daugherty sought a way to continue her brother's legacy of wanting to fight the epidemic in any way possible. "By the end, [Bret] realized that his life was not going to be saved, but he was very interested in helping other people," she says.

In 1997 the mother of two donned her helmet and rode in her first AIDS ride from Vancouver to Seattle with her sister, an accomplished cyclist. It was on this ride that Daugherty met Mary Harding, a woman who'd pinned a picture of her brother to her riding gear; after a brief chat, the women discovered that their brothers had died of AIDS six days apart. They have ridden together ever since. This year Daugherty connected with another person who lost a brother to AIDS—one of her donors, Allen Zwickler, founder of the Phil Zwickler Charitable and Memorial Foundation Trust (pzfoundation.org). The foundation, which Zwickler established in honor of his brother, who passed away in 1991, supports a variety of human rights and environmental initiatives.

After finishing this year's ride, Daugherty took a few days to sightsee in New York before heading back home to Seattle; soon she'll have to start gearing up for next year. "It's not over," she says. "HIV/AIDS is the only disease where if you tell someone you have it, the very first thing that people often ask is 'How did you get it?' It's not an innocent question. The stigma tied to HIV/AIDS is what makes me the most passionate." Ride on. —NICOLE JOSEPH



From top: Daugherty at the beginning of the Empire State AIDS ride; a view of Niagara Falls on day 1; Daugherty with her friend and fellow rider Mary Harding; a rider campsite at New York's Seneca Lake; Daugherty's intrepid riding team poses on day 7; finally nearing the Manhattan finish line; Daugherty celebrates the end of a long journey.

COURTESY OF TRACY DAUGHERTY