

## ***A STORY OF COURAGE AND TRANSFORMATION***

***By LESLIE SCHNEIDER***

***A HUMAN INTEREST STORY FOR THE PUGET SOUND BICYCLING COMMUNITY, PUBLISHED JUNE 1998 IN THE CASCADE COURIER, A PUBLICATION OF THE CASCADE BICYCLE CLUB***

By Christmas, 1994, my mother decided she had to try to rescue her body. Arthritis, too many pounds, and various other source-unknown ailments had crippled her and put her on crutches for many weeks that fall. She was 60 years old, had raised five kids, and was working full time as an elementary computer educator in the Kent School district. She was going to try bicycling as her exercise of choice, even though she had not been on a bike since childhood.

It's true that you never forget how to ride a bike, but there is also a lot to learn when you start long distance riding at age 60. She decided that in order to make it up hills she would have to learn how to ride with clipping shoes. For quite a while I held my breath every time we came to a stop because she toppled at many of these. But she always got up and continued riding.

Two summers earlier I had ridden the 200-mile, 2-day Seattle-to-Portland (STP) ride for the first time. Now, helping my mother to get in shape, I suggested that she might be able to hold STP as her training goal. We broke it down and agreed that if she could do a training ride of 60 miles with hills, she could probably complete the STP. And even if she didn't finish, the goal would motivate her training.

Well, she did it, every mile. Very slowly. If you rode that year, you likely passed her. But the first day she made it all the way to Toledo (much more than 1/2 way), where we stayed at the St. Mary's convent. It's an understatement to say it was hard for her, but she was so proud of herself at the end of that first day, and crossing the finish line the next day was almost anticlimactic. On Day Two she teetered up the bridge at Longview with cars and trucks zooming past inches away, and someone yelled at her to go faster. That was the low point for her, and she was very scared.

It turns out that STP was a training ride for what came next! Some colleagues at work invited her to join their yearly 10-day bicycle adventure, this time a 500-mile trek around the Olympic Peninsula in July. Weather caused the trip to be cut short, but she



completed more than 350 miles, including one "century" day (100 miles or more) and many hills and logging trucks.

She continued to exercise through the fall and winter, walking steps with her carpool partner or working out at the North Seattle Community College with my brother. I trained with her the next spring, but she did the 1996 STP without me when I learned that I was pregnant. By then she had lost 30 pounds and many of her aches and pains had disappeared. As a celebration, the family pitched in and sent her on a kayaking trip north of Vancouver Island, which she loved. Again, she joined the 500-mile/10-day yearly bicycle adventure, this time touring in Idaho.

Spring of 1997 was difficult. I had my baby in February and was determined to do STP to get back in shape, so the training began again. But my diabetic sister's kidneys were failing and she had to go on dialysis. My mother wanted to be the donor for a transplant, and she sailed through the rigorous testing. Coincidentally, one of the sponsors for the '97 STP was the Northwest Kidney Foundation, with the slogan "Out Spokin' for Organ Donation."

Surgery was scheduled for the Thursday following Mom's third STP. The wet weather made the ride historically challenging. As usual, Mom transformed a negative into a positive and remarked in wonderment that it was possible to just keep cycling during such a downpour. I made up silly slogans like "why are we biking when the rain is driving?" to entertain myself and keep rolling.

The Monday after we got back, I got a call at work that my mom wanted to take me out to lunch. I had a hunch that something about the transplant was not right. She told me that the final scan taken just before the weekend ride showed a tumor on her kidney. It was small, and maybe surgery would fix everything. The transplant, however, was off.

We were not to be that lucky. A bone scan later showed metastasis, and there is very little to be done about advanced kidney cancer. Anyway, you do what there is to do, and after a quick and strong recuperation from surgery she started immunotherapy. It was then that she lost her health completely and never got it back, even though she had been symptom-free going in to it. Even so, the hope she had created in her bicycling stayed with her. She continued to work out, however gently, on the stationary bicycle up to a week before she died, April 14, 1998. We proudly displayed her bike and STP jacket at her memorial service.

I know that there are other mother-daughter cycling teams, on STP or other long rides, enjoying the kind of relationship that we had. We met one last year at the St. Mary's center. For all potential teams, daughters, know that your patience and support (if this is new for your mother) is rewarded many-fold for the inspiration your mother will be to you as you grow older.

Mothers, know that you can regain some of your youth! Even though my mother's life was cut short by cancer, she won back three years of cherished health, vitality, and adventure when she needed it most. And her sense of being an athlete helped her struggle through that last tough journey with pride.

My sister did get a kidney, from my brother a couple months later, and both of them are now doing fine. I will ride STP again, in her honor, but not this year. Please don't yell at slow riders, especially on bridges. And please sign your donor card. Moms everywhere thank you.