

**Day Six - Thursday, 6/26 - St. James, Stratford to Mercy House and Shelter, Hartford**

Started to worry about getting up on time. Six of us would be cycling from Stratford, leaving at 6:00 am while the others would be leaving later and meeting up with us at 9:00 am at a Dunkin Donuts in Wallingford area, approximately 22 miles outside of Hartford.

I was tired, didn’t sleep all that well as I did not inflate my mattress, wanted to save time in the morning. Also we had some serious snoring going on last night as most of us were all cuddled close together in one big room. I know Maureen didn’t get as much sleep as she would have liked. She was hurting this morning.

I had to call Jaon over at her cousin’s house to assure she would be ready to be picked up by Steve around 5:30 am. Wow this is early. Her phone wasn’t on and I panicked for a bit. Called her “other” cell phone and did get her. She was ready to go.

Slowly we all began to get up, one by one finding our way to the restroom, to the breakfast area. Kathy had gotten up extra early to be sure we had breakfast. The St. James folks also were there bright and early to feed us.

With a lot of moans and groans we each got ready. Tires were inflated, water bottle filled. It has rained that night. The air was cool and refreshing to start our ride.

The six of us, me, Johnnie F, Eric, Maureen, Wayne, and Jim (the new guy) were ready to roll by a little after 6:00.

The Cue sheet I prepared seemed pretty “easy” as compared to what we rode earlier in the week. But I know there would be some hills. We were about to hit our first one only a few miles into the ride as we entered the Milford area. Jim, familiar with this area, advised we could avoid this first hill if we went along the beach. We only had one SAG vehicle with Joan and Steve aboard so we had to inform them that we were going to change our route slightly. I communicated with Joan via our walkie talkies and all was well.

We road along quite pleasantly until just before we hit New Haven Johnnie F got a flat tire. We hurried to get it fix as we were on a tight schedule. Johnnie fixed the flat quickly and just before we started noticed his tire, yes, his tire, had a wear hole in it about a half inch long and quarter inch wide. Too bad he didn’t notice it before he put in the new tube. Could have put in a dollar bill which would definitely hold for a good length of time. Well he didn’t do that but rode gingerly, not his usual self for the next 40 some odd miles on that tire. He would not be deterred.

We called ahead to ask Joan and Steve to purchase a new tire once a bike shop opened. It was too early as it was only around 7:45 when this happened. Later, it became a funny story when Joan presented John with a brand new tube to fix his tire. Whoops! We meant new tire! Well, anyway, Johnnie continued to cycle to our meeting point at DD on that tire.

Our ride through New Haven was kind of cool. I really like riding through the city. Seems we get a lot of attention.

We did encounter some hills and I struggled each time we did. Man, I was sucking wind big time. I was so appreciative with the other riders who all passed me going up quite easily except for Wayne who always was close by asking if I was okay. Totally appreciate that Wayne. Got a few “asks” from the other as well. I am grateful they all waited until I took the lead again before continuing. It was such an enjoyable ride because of that.

We really had no difficulties with the Cue sheet. We got to DD at about 9:05 and found out that Bob, Pam, and Claire were already cycling ahead of us. Tom and John Ryan were going ahead to set up for the Finale and we were all to meet up down the road at a Webster Bank a few miles from Mercy House. We were stopped several miles down the road at a McDonald’s where Claire had gotten off her bike but Bob and Pam continued.

Johnnie did not push it with his tire and decided not to ride any longer. The rest of us thought we would catch Bob and Pam but never did. We met them at Webster Bank.

All got some quick nourishment and we started to the Finale.

The ride to there wasn’t bad. Traffic, a lot of lights and resulting stops but we got there right at 11:30 the time we said we would be there.

We took our necessary potty breaks, lined up our bikes, took some photos and began to prepare for the Finale event.

We found out that the Hartford mayor could not make it to the Finale but promised to send a representative. Also whatever other state representative who said they would be at the Finale did not show up either. One did call ahead and because of a family emergency could not attend. The mayor’s representative did not show up and did not advise us so.

Tom Sacerdote was wonderful as he spoke beautifully about the ride, what we were there for, and our mission. He graciously introduced Sister Pat McKeon, Executive Director of Mercy House and Shelter Corporation. She gave a remarkable talk and highlighted the good that Mercy House does for the needy of the community. She also said we should not really have a need for shelters in this state and in this country. That we have gotten to comfortable with having shelters and soup kitchens. We have heard this before but the situation seems to get worse every year.

Tom also introduced a representative from John Larson’s office who spoke but really didn’t say much of anything. I am sorry but I did not catch his name.

We all kind of felt deflated after such a great ride experience and another letdown Finale. What can we do better. We sort of had a quick debrief about it before anyone left. We have got to think about it and talk about it, how do we make our Finale a real event??

While we waited for the speakers to speak some of us interacted with passers by. I talked to a homeless man who had gotten kicked out of South Park shelter and was banned for two years. He said he had trouble finding a place to stay and was sleeping outside even in this past winter. How do they do it? Another said story. He only had the clothes on his back.

As I was talking to this man, Aldene showed up. He lived in the transitional housing here at Mercy House. Unfortunately he less than a month left to live there and would have to find another place to live. He said his faith would guide him. He did not want to go back to South Park. It was good seeing him and he was still thrilled with our mission and the action we were taking to help folks like him. I could see how grateful he was. We shook hands and he went on his way.

We did have lunch right there in the soup kitchen, our last interaction in a soup kitchen on this year’s ride. Sodexo company provided the lunch and served.

I sat away from the rest of the team to be alone but also to be with some of the clients there for lunch.

I sat with a mom and her son and asked her why she thought we were all there in our biking gear. Her answer sort of surprised me. She said “for the free lunch?” I laughed and told her about our ride and our purpose for doing it. She was grateful and asked why there is not more for single moms trying to raise their kids. She said people on drugs or alcohol get more aid than single moms. I told her she has to ask about the programs for single moms to try and find out more information. She said it is so very hard, that her food stamps run out before the end of the month and she has to come to soup kitchens to get food for her son. She also advise me that she got a better job but because she made more money her food stamps were cut so she is no better off. What a stupid system we have in this country, in this state. Something is wrong, very wrong.

As we talked, her son was fiddling with his strawberry short cake. I guess he didn’t like the strawberries. I asked him if he would like a piece of cake with just whipped cream. He excitedly said he would. I went over and got him a piece and with a big smile he devoured it. We talked a little about bicycles and as he and his mom were leaving he said to me, “don’t fall off your bike”. I guessed he must have known I had a few accidents in the past.

I was feeling a little melancholy or maybe I was just tired but I left to go outside with the rest of the team. W had our little meeting, took a few more photos, hugged each other as we all began to depart.

Eric, Pam, and I were going to be the only ones who would ride back to St. Bridget. Our way of ending this year’s ride. Just before we left, Wayne handed me something. It was an orange and green survival bracelet with a silver cross weaved in it. I will wear that from now on just like I have my self-made WWJD bracelet. Thanks Wayne! He made me cry.

We got back to St. Bridget within a reasonable amount of time. Only John Ryan and Wendy were there. We said our last goodbyes. I rode home as I always do, alone with my thoughts, a tear in my eye, incredibly tired, but satisfied we did good. The Holy Spirit was with us as always. I thanked God we all got home safely. I look forward to our next weeklong.

Lou