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## Ride of a lifetime

### California man bikes across country for quadriplegic sister

*Brent Brown*

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Greensburg — Cal Fire engineer John Byrne left California's historic Golden Gate bridge Sept. 9 for New York not fully knowing what to expect from the roads that lay ahead of him.

Accompanied only by his friend Tony Hernandez, a San Diego Fire Training Captain, Byrne departed his home state on a friend's bicycle with the singular goal of raising money for his quadriplegic sister. His destination was the Brooklyn Bridge, another renowned landmark that would effectively bookend his cross-country trip; a personal journey intended only to improve his sister's quality of life.

And though the long road ahead of John and Tony has often been arduous, the two have few complaints.

"Everything, from the beginning, has worked out for us," said John Friday morning from the Greensburg Fire Station.

John and Tony reached Decatur County Thursday night and were taken in as honored guests by the Greensburg Fire Department (GFD).

GFD Chief Scott Chasteen recently heard about John's journey and met the duo near Hartsville Thursday evening before setting them up for the night at the station. John "slept in" until a little after 8 a.m. Friday morning before getting ready to resume his trip.

And what a trip it's been.

Tony's chase vehicle suffered a flat tire in the Mojave Desert not long after departure. They've crossed through the Rockies, traversed some rather treacherous biking terrain in Missouri and howling winds in Kansas. John has "hit the wall" emotionally on more than one occasion, and he's certainly suffering the physical aches and pains one might expect from biking about 100 miles per day (for eight to 10 hours at a time) for nearly a month.

But this trip is about neither John nor Tony. It's for Lauren Byrne, John's 22-year-old sister who was paralyzed seven years ago in a diving accident in the family pool. Lauren hopes to go to college and become a teacher one day. Above all, she would like to live more independently.

John set off on his bicycle journey in the hopes he could raise enough money to make his sister's dreams come true. His initial hope was that he could garner enough funds to purchase a hand-operated wheelchair for Lauren in order to allow her more mobility. Despite being defined as a quadriplegic, Lauren has some use of her hands and arms and is active in wheelchair rugby.

By Friday, it appeared John had more than reached his goal, and in doing so, he'd inspired many multitudes.

When the trip ends Oct. 14 in Brooklyn, however, it may well be John and Tony who have benefited most from the journey.

“This trip has completely restored my faith in humanity,” remarked Tony.

Since the trip's outset, the two California men have been welcomed with open arms by their firefighting brethren across the country. They've slept in fire stations, churches and even the homes of Fire Chiefs. They've been fed and housed by perfect strangers who, under different circumstances, might never have crossed the path of the pair of “Golden State” public servants. Through it all, they've been thankful for the generosity and support.

“These guys have been great,” mentioned John of Chief Chasteen and the GFD members he and Tony met this week. “Everyone's been very supportive.”

John has also found strong support from Lauren, whom he described as a positive person who helps others with disabilities. The siblings have spoken often on the trip, and this close connection with family members has kept both men going, no matter the physical and emotional strain. Tony is married with two children and a pair of grandchildren and plans to fly back home shortly after helping John complete the trip.

Both men will soon reach Freehold, N.J., a place where John's late grandfather served as a firefighter, before they set their eyes on the Brooklyn Bridge. John is named after his grandfather, who died prior to John's birth. Freehold will serve as a “base” and a rest area for the two weary travelers. John is hoping more family members will be able to join him when he crosses the proverbial “finish line.”

Regardless of who will be there in person, many will be watching from home.

Those interested in John's journey can track both men via [www.lauren'sride.org](http://www.lauren'sride.org). A Facebook page has also been set up which users can “like” and donate to John and Tony's cause through PayPal. Tony has chronicled the ride by recording a video log each day.

The positive comments the men have received from outlets such as those have helped make the physically demanding trip far more manageable than it might have been otherwise. The outpouring of support for Lauren's Ride has resulted in kindness and generosity even from those too young to fully grasp the reasons behind it. John carries two quarters donated by children to help Lauren. Both coins were all two youngsters had to give, but they were more than willing to part with the change to help out a “hero.” One child even asked for John's autograph, a request the Cal Fire engineer was more than happy to fulfill.

Neither John nor Tony sees himself as a hero or a role model. Instead, they're motivated by the cause and they try not to look too far ahead in terms of distance or time. They rely on those who've offered moral support and Tony's infectious sense of humor to keep pushing forward; and oddly enough, the trip has been made a bit more fun by the presence of a box turtle found in Missouri.

“Darrell” the turtle spends his time feasting on leafy greens and bugs in the comfort of Tony's truck, occasionally milling about whenever John and Tony stop to rest. He's become a “mascot” of sorts for the duo, and the unexpected guest has proven himself a worthy traveling companion.

Darrell made himself at home at the GFD station Friday morning while local chiropractor Dr. Deanna Pacilio tended to the considerable aches of John and Tony. John is suffering from tissue inflammation

throughout his body, though Dr. Pacilio believes he'll recover completely once the journey is complete.

When it ends, the two men will return to California to briefly rest and resume their jobs. They'll go back home to supportive families who've undoubtedly missed them, bringing along stories to share for a lifetime.

Separated from that end by a little more than a week and a couple thousand miles, the Nipomo, Calif. native can see the finish line.

And though he knows his trip has touched the hearts of many, it was really undertaken for the sake of one.

"It all goes to Lauren for her independence," said John. "She's very positive and motivating."

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