

Lauren's Ride

Nipomo firefighter to ride across the country to help his injured sister

By Jennifer Best/Contributing Writer [Comments](#) [Email this story](#) [Print this story](#)

John Byrne would walk into a burning building to save a stranger, so it comes as little surprise to friends and family that he'll be pedaling from coast to coast to help his little sister.

Beginning Sept. 9, the Nipomo firefighter will ride 3,600 miles from San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge to New York's Brooklyn Bridge to buy her independence.

"It all started out as just another one of my crazy ideas," Byrne said during a break from a 100-mile training ride over the Cuesta Grade.

With the support of fire associations across the nation, Byrne will pedal an average of 100 miles per day, sleep in fire stations and raise money to purchase his sister an adapted vehicle. Family, friends and firefighters are promoting the ride and organizing spaghetti feeds and silent auctions, all in the name of Lauren Byrne.

"It's crazy, it's overwhelming, it's exciting," the 22-year-old woman said.

Lauren was 15 years old when she injured her spine and nearly drowned after jumping into a pool. Instead of learning to drive and navigate the nation's roadways, she learned to use her arms again and to pilot her wheelchair.

"We have hope she'll someday walk again. It's hard. You never know. You go to the hospital, and no one has any answers for you. But she's really positive. She really motivates me. She's never wanted people to feel bad for her. As time goes on, I think she'll inspire people more than anything," John said.

While John was promoted through firefighting ranks, Lauren remained at home to recover her health and mobility, complete her high school education and work with children. While John serves as engineer at the Cal Fire/San Luis Obispo County Fire station in Nipomo and competes in triathlons, Lauren depends upon parents and friends to shuttle her to classes at Ohlone College, physical therapy and her wheelchair rugby practices and games.

"Lauren's very motivated in life. She hasn't given up on anything, but I know how she struggles. I think every person by the time they're 18 has the ability to drive and move out of the parents' house. I'd like to see her move out and transfer to a four-year college and become a teacher and live a normal life," John said during a break from a recent training ride over the Cuesta Grade.

During a camping trip with his sister, John learned just how frustrated Lauren was with her inability to drive. She wasn't getting the classes she needed, was juggling work and school, and every appointment required a family discussion about her transportation options.

"He knew I wasn't being lazy about things," Lauren said. "He wanted me to focus on bigger things in my life, like school and a career, not just a car."

In April, while wrapping up the final paperwork to become a "big brother" for the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program, John started thinking about his own little sister's needs.

"I feel pretty lucky to be where I'm at in life right now. I wondered how I could do more," he said.

A family friend had given him a high-quality road bike, which he decided to put to good use by riding solo from San



Luis Obispo to Golden Gate Bridge in three rainy, adventure-filled days.

“Along the way, people kept asking me what I was riding for. I’d just say, “Cause I’m crazy,”” John said.

But the question sparked an idea. Suddenly, a cross-country ride seemed not only like a good idea to John but one that could benefit Lauren.

“I posted it on Facebook to see what people thought. Within a day, there was a website with video, donation capability, maps, and I’m in total disbelief. I’m thinking, ‘Wait! This is just an idea,’” John said.

Within a week, he had talked to his family, chief and peers at work.

“I’ll tell you, my life from that point on has been unbelievable. The first three weeks after we launched this were the best three weeks of my life. I can’t explain all the kind things I saw. It’s completely changed my life, my whole family’s life,” John said.

Cal Fire Capt. Michael DeLeo was with John when he learned about Lauren’s accident. He watched the family struggle with the aftermath.

“I saw the progress of her injury, how hard it was on her and her family, and I saw how positive she stayed. You see someone deal with a tragedy like that, and it’s inspirational. Lauren’s always been an inspiration to us,” DeLeo said.

When DeLeo learned about the ride, he began researching routes, sponsors and volunteers to help with the effort.

“John is the kind of guy who would just get on a bike and start riding. That didn’t sound too safe to me. I’m one of those guys who tries to plan for the worst and hopes for the best. He’s the eternal optimist, so we balance each other out pretty well,” DeLeo said.

Tony Hernandez, training captain for Cal Fire San Diego, will drive the route to serve as John’s support crew. Fluid Sports Nutrition, a San Luis Obispo-based recovery drink manufacturer, will provide supplements for the ride, and San Luis Obispo County Firefighters Benevolent Association is sponsoring the event.

“I don’t want anyone to think they were funding a trip across the U.S. for a bike ride. With the addition of a support vehicle, there is more added logistical cost, but 100 percent of the money donated online goes toward Lauren’s vehicle. Some sponsorships and part of the meal funds will support our fuel costs,” John said.

Corrin Lee, a Cal Fire dispatcher out of San Luis Obispo, is organizing a fundraising send-off dinner. The dinner will be held from 5 to 10 p.m. Friday, Sept. 7, at Edwards Barn, 1095 Pomeroy Road in Nipomo. Tickets for the Italian-style dinner are available at www.laurenside.org or at the door while food lasts. The evening will include a no-host bar, silent auction, door-prize giveaway and live music by The Panhandlers.

John’s and Lauren’s mother, Judy Byrne, will coordinate a similar event the following evening in the Bay Area before John and Hernandez hit the road.

Cal Fire Capt. Steve Meikle, with help from the Cal Fire firefighters union, is contacting fire departments along John’s intended route to make lodging plans. Amy Jones, executive assistant with Cal Fire in Los Osos, is coordinating planning, public information and press work. Andy Meuerle of New Jersey and the man behind John’s bike will coordinate the final stages of the ride.

“I figure if, through the course of this ride, I meet 3,000 people who are willing to donate \$10 each, we’d hit our goal,” John said.

“When John says he’s going to do something, he’ll do it,” Lauren said.

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