

Life-changing experience for firefighter

John Byrne cycles 3,600 miles for sister

OCTOBER 29, 2012 12:00 AM • [BY JENNIFER BEST / CONTRIBUTING WRITER](#)



Tanned, ripped, exhausted but elated, John Byrne hoisted his bike up the steps to the Brooklyn Bridge pedestrian path Oct. 14 to celebrate the culmination of his 36-day, 3,600-mile fundraising ride across the nation.

“There are some things I’ve concluded on this ride,” Byrne said the following day. “Some people say every journey begins with one step, but before that step comes confidence in yourself.

“A lot of times we stop ourselves before we even try,” he said. “Once you start believing in yourself, you attract people in your life who support you, and then the steps go on their own.”

With the support of firefighter associations across the nation, Byrne’s trek from Golden Gate Bridge to Brooklyn Bridge raised money to buy a specialized vehicle for his sister, Lauren Byrne of Newark, CA.

Lauren was 15 years old when she injured her spine and nearly drowned after jumping into a pool. Now wheelchair-bound with limited arm mobility, she inspires her brother and others as she attends college, plays wheelchair rugby and works toward fulfilling her dreams.

Family, friends and firefighters promoted the ride and organized special events along the way, starting with a trip-launching spaghetti feed Sept. 7 in Nipomo.

Byrne kicked off the ride Sept. 9 at the Golden Gate Bridge.

By the time he reached New York, he had raised more than \$53,000 in donations from supporters across the nation.

“I’ve had all the excitement, I’ve seen a lot of things, I might be a little sleep-deprived, but in a month or two, we’ll have the vehicle for Lauren and she’ll be living a more independent life,” Byrne said.

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Tony Hernandez, training captain for Cal Fire San Diego, drove the chase vehicle and provided moral support as Byrne conquered his own doubts through blazing Southwest deserts, steep Rocky Mountains, Kansas winds and Missouri hill country.

“Every time it got really hard, I’d take a break, sit in the car, call Lauren, my parents, my friends,” he said. “Tony would read the comments left on the blog and on Facebook, and that kept the excitement going.”

Byrne and Hernandez had a general plan but allowed details to evolve based on local knowledge.

“I think the neatest thing on this trip was we never knew what would be the next 100 miles away,” Byrne said. “We would head out in the morning not really knowing where we were going.

“There was always some local knowledge that would lead us on an unintended route or show us a better way to go. I knew as long as we kept riding northeast, we’d get there.”

By the time Byrne and Hernandez reached Flagstaff, Ariz., Byrne sought medical aid for a virus that was slowing him down.

“At that point, I thought, ‘If I can make it through the desert and the Rockies, I’m in good shape,” he recalled. “The ride’s basically over.”

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On one of Byrne’s biggest climbing days in the Rocky Mountains, while Hernandez ran morning errands, the bike’s chain broke.

There was no cell service, and Byrne didn’t have the tools needed to make the repair.

After a few minutes, a passerby stopped. As luck would have it, he was a retired firefighter who had also owned a bike shop. They made a roadside repair and parted ways.

“Five miles before the top of the Rockies, he shows up again with all the tools we need to completely fix the chain,” Byrne said. “Then he rode with me to the top.”

On the downhill, Byrne reveled in the colors, the trees and topography.

“In my head, at this point, I’m thinking, ‘It’s all downhill from here,’” Byrne said.

Hernandez and Byrne had figured, correctly, that the mountain stints would be more challenging, so they’d shortened the daily mileage for a few days.

They planned to pick up the losses in the flats of Kansas to bring the average back to 100 miles per day.

But Kansas brought 11-straight days of 15- to 20-mph head-on winds.

“It was worse than climbing the Rocky Mountains,” Byrne said.

Riding days stretched into evenings as Byrne tired and the wind persisted.

“I’d have to talk myself through it like an auctioneer,” he said. “I’d look at the odometer and say, ‘11 miles, 11 miles, 11 miles, 11.01, 11.01, 11.01, 11.02”

“I’d already heard my (music) play list. There was no cell service. There weren’t as many things to look at, so it was very mentally challenging.”

Although he sat in the relative luxury of the chase vehicle, Hernandez faced personal challenges as well: His mother was hospitalized and fighting for her life.

“It’s very hard for his family right now,” Byrne said.

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Trees in Missouri added some interest to the ride, but so did an unexpected ascent of 17,000 feet over the course of two days.

“I hit the wall,” Byrne said. “I sat down on the side of the road, took off all my stuff and decided I wouldn’t be on schedule.

“Every day we were starting later because I was exhausted from the day before,” he said. “I knew I’d finish the ride, but I was compromising.”

Byrne called his dad, whose encouragement got him through another day.

“I really felt alone. I felt lost,” Byrne said. “There were two or three days when I really thought I wouldn’t finish the ride on time.

“But I always knew I’d finish,” he added. “I had too much support from too many people not to finish this ride.”

Passing under Gateway Arch in St. Louis was a huge turning point, Byrne said, but his body was hammered.

“My (iliotibial bands) were in so much pain,” he said of the fibrous structure that helps rotate the hip and stabilize the knee. “My hip flexor hurt every pedal I took. I took ibuprofen, but it didn’t matter.”

Near Greensburg, Ind., local chiropractor Deanna Pacilio worked on Byrne for nearly two hours during a fire station stop.

“It made a huge difference that next day,” Byrne said. “I tried to take it really easy the next two days, and by day three I felt stronger than I had in two weeks.”

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Cal Fire/San Luis Obispo County Fire Department Capt. Mike Deleo joined the ride through West Virginia.

“We talked a lot about life and the people we were meeting,” Byrne said. “When you start out, people aren’t sure you’re going to finish it. The farther we got from home, people got more and more excited.

“It was really becoming unbelievable to me that we were 2,000 miles away, 2,500 miles away,” he added. “Every step we were getting closer to New York, the more excited people were getting.”

On the way into Conshohocken, Penn., Byrne and Hernandez stopped to pay tribute to Officer Bradley Fox, a police officer killed on duty there Sept. 13.

Then they swung by the Montgomery County Fire Academy to see a wall memorializing volunteer firefighters who paid the ultimate price for their service.

By the time Lauren’s Ride reached the township borders, police, fire and other emergency apparatus lined the streets.

“Every intersection had a fire engine, and as we rolled through, the engines fell in behind us and escorted us with lights and sirens,” Byrne marveled.

“We rode in under the American flag. The mayor showed up. Me and Tony kept saying we couldn’t imagine it getting any better, but it did. It’s something I’ll never experience again.”

Fire Chief Stephen Phipps joined the ride for 10 miles.

“He’d never met me, but he said, ‘He’s a firefighter. He’s a brother. I’d do anything for the guy,’” Byrne recalled. “That’s the reception we saw every time we arrived in a city. No one ever asked me any questions. It’s just love.”

In Freehold, N.J., where the grandfather for whom he was named once served as firefighter, Byrne was greeted by dozens of family members from both coasts.

“It was very emotional for us,” Byrne said. “You know the next day is just a victory lap.”

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The last leg of the ride, Byrne was joined by Andy Meuerle, his godfather and the donor of the bike he road throughout this quest, along with cousin Melissa Andreev, Deleo and David Lienemann, a paid-call firefighter at the Nipomo Cal Fire station.

“It was amazing,” Andreev said. “I’m just so proud of him. I wish I could have done more of the ride with him. I felt like the president.”

A second cousin, Bob Williams, helped organize the trek from New Jersey through New York to the Brooklyn Bridge, including a reception at the State Island Elks Lodge.

The choreographed arrival included members of the New York Police Department, New York Fire Department, Rolling Thunder, Wagner College’s Vocal Synergy, New Jersey State Troopers and the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey.

“It was a beautiful afternoon,” Williams said. “The sun was out. He wasn’t going to come in alone.”

Hernandez flew home to rejoin his family, while Byrne drove cross-country to bring home the gear and return the rental car.

By last Thursday, he was back working his shift at Cal Fire’s Nipomo Fire Station.

“There’s a good part of me that’s really sad this journey has ended,” Byrne reflected. “It’s changed my life, changed our family’s life. I’m really thankful.”