

The Ride of My Life
By LISA HOLLIS
Photo Editor

In 1995 I drove my friend and her bike to San Francisco. She was participating in the California AIDS Ride, a bike ride from San Francisco to Los Angeles to raise money for the treatment of those with HIV/AIDS. She had lost most of her friends to AIDS, and this was her way of defeating a disease that had changed her life.

She had pledged to ride every year until a cure is found. I watched her go on training rides every weekend, work out at the gym, and spend months fundraising in order to raise the \$2,500 in contributions necessary to go. I admired her commitment. At the end of the week, when the riders rode into Los Angeles after completing the 500+ mile journey, I saw triumphant gleams in their eyes. Granted, they looked sunburned, banged up, Ace-bandaged, and completely exhausted; as if they were returning from a war. But the power that emanated from those 2,500 bike riders moved me to tears.

At that moment I knew this was something I had to do. I'm not a cyclist by training or temperament, but I wouldn't miss California AIDS Ride 5, held this year from May 31 to June 6.

I was on my bike from sunrise to sunset, through farmland, hills, mountains and along the shore. I chanted as I climbed steep grades...and when I was bored...and when I was sure I couldn't peddle anymore. I did gongyo on the road, reciting the sutra to the wide-open, deserted landscapes. I carried the Gohonzon with me, my *omamori* (small Gohonzon) on a chain around my neck.

Spending that much time on a bike, I became very aware of my inner voices — the ones that say, “you can't do this” and “who do you think you are?” — the voices of my own negativity. I learned that I can listen to these voices and let them defeat me. Or I can find the place inside of me that goes beyond negativity, beyond my doubt, fear and discomfort. On a bike in the middle of nowhere, these voices become very strong. Ultimately, the Ride, for me, meant doing battle with these voices.

The daily average was 90 mountainous miles. There's a “sag truck” that follows the riders and makes sure no one falls behind. If you go too slow, you'll get sagged; that is, the truck picks up your bike and drives you to the next camp. One evening the driver told a group of us, “Unless you get going, you'll be sagged in five minutes.”

Part of me just wanted to climb on that truck, I was so exhausted. But it was a matter of heart — I was determined to ride each mile. There were other riders who were HIV-positive who needed medication every four hours — they had every reason to sag, but they refused to give up. I realized that for me, giving up isn't a matter of my body being unable to continue, it's about mentally losing the will to go on. So when I felt like quitting, I would think about why I was there: I was doing it because someone in a hospital bed somewhere needed me to do it; because every mile I rode enabled someone to live another day.

As I said, I'm a slow rider and didn't have a lot of time to spend on serious photography. But I did take a few snapshots that I hope will give you a taste of what I consider to be the Ride of my life.

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