

Another cycle of healthy charity

BY MEGHAN V. MALLOY

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Ken Bell takes cycling seriously.

He has ridden among the towering peaks of Montana's Rocky Mountains and the crowded concrete jungle of New York City's five boroughs.

But when it comes to the annual Trek Across Maine, a three-day, 180-mile bicycle ride from Sunday River through Farmington and Waterville to Belfast, the weekend is about connecting with other riders, taking in scenery and raising money for a good cause, Bell said.

Today marks the 25th anniversary of Trek Across Maine, a fundraiser for the American Lung Association of Maine.

Money is raised through corporate sponsors and pledges brought in by the riders, with the funds going toward research and advocacy to fight lung disease and promote clean air.

Scott Cowger, of Hallowell, has ridden in every Trek since the first one in 1984, when he was 24 years old. That summer, he said, there were a few more than 100 riders, and they were equipped with "a map and told, 'See you at the end.'"

Since then, the 100 have become 2,600, raising more than \$1 million in corporate sponsorship and pledges.

Of the 2,600, eight people -- seven riders and one volunteer -- have been a part of every trek, including Cowger.

"It is the one commitment I have every year that takes precedence above everything else," he said. "It is always set in stone."

Cowger and Bell remember when the trek was rustic.

Riders were lucky if they broke down near the sole mechanic on the route. Meals were out of pocket, and the nightly accommodations were "not fancy to say the least," Bell said.

Twenty-five years later, rest stops stocked with snacks and bottles of water every 15 miles. Bike mechanics are at every rest stop.

Bell has ridden the 180-mile route for 23 years, and volunteered the first year of the ride. As with Cowger, Trek Across Maine is more than just tradition for Bell -- it's a part of life during the summer.



Staff photo by Andy Molloy

ON THE ROAD AGAIN: Scott Cowger, of Hallowell, is participating in the 25th annual Trek Across Maine this Friday to raise money for the American Lung Association.

"For those of us who been doing the trek for a long time, this ride means something to us," Bell said. "We get very attached to it."

As a former ambulance attendant, Bell remembers transporting premature babies to Portland for treatment because their lungs collapsed. Seeing the work of the American Lung Association "has really stuck with me."

"When you physically, actually see where your money and energy goes, that means something to you," Bell said.

Such a bond connects all 2,600 riders, Cowger said.

"It's like a big family reunion every year," he said. "After 25 years, you start making connections with people."

Many trekkers ride as part of a team that seeks out business sponsorship. Cowger is a member of Charlie's Big Wheels Team, sponsored by Charlie's Motor Mall of Augusta. The 20-member crew intends to raise \$25,000 for the American Lung Association -- a goal, Cowger said, they will meet, if not exceed.

Bell rides for a team sponsored by Kennebec Savings Bank. Not only do the teams provide an atmosphere of healthy competition, they provide a sense of family and camaraderie out on the route, he said.

"The ride has become huge," Bell said of the number of riders. "The team kind of provides a social outlet for me, and lets me get to know more people personally."

And despite the growing numbers, all rider share a "sense of accomplishment and togetherness" as their tire treads cross into Belfast.

"I don't mean to talk about (Trek across Maine) so much, but that's how much it means to me and to the people who ride it," Bell said.

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You can link to the [Kennebec Journal here](#).