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Riding for life

From San Francisco to Los Angeles, cyclists raise funds for AIDS

By Jasmine Marshall / Times Staff Writer

SANTA MARIA - Although aching and tired, 53-year-old Ben Goldstein of San Francisco said he felt "exhilarated" after riding 100 miles Thursday from Paso Robles to Preisker Park in Santa Maria in day four of an AIDS/LifeCycle fundraiser.

The former cellist said he never thought of himself "as an athlete," before training for the event - a seven day, 600 mile bicycle trip from San Francisco to Los Angeles to raise money for the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center and San Francisco AIDS Foundation.

The ride has not been an easy one for Goldstein, who has lived with full-blown AIDS for the past six years, and was diagnosed as being HIV-positive more than 20 years ago. Suffering side-effects like light sensitivity due to the AIDS "cocktail" he must now take every day, Goldstein said "there have been times I have wanted to cry from the pain."

Yet the joy and freedom of this ride through California have brought him much more, Goldstein said.

"I am doing this because I still can," he said. "I am doing this because I know people who cannot who are lying in hospital beds or who are in their graves. This ride has been wonderful - it's forced me to let go of my self-image as someone who could not do something like this, and it's surrounded me with the love and support of people who are like angels."

Those "angels" include more than 200 "roadie volunteers" who help set up tents for the 700 riders at each campsite along the route, doctors who have given up vacations to treat riders who might become injured, and other riders brought together from all walks of life.

There's Charmaine Grays, a 45-year-old human resource specialist from Oakland, Calif., who used a week of her vacation time to honor her cousin Vincent Ivy, whose life ended too soon because of AIDS. Riding down a hill into Morro Bay, Grays said she could feel his spirit with her as she looked at the beauty of the coastline.

"He really was there," she said. "He would love this."

For many, the AIDS/LifeCycle is an opportunity to educate the public and dispel the myth that the AIDS crisis is over. More than 47,000 Californians have AIDS, and another 130,000 are infected with HIV. AIDS is spreading at faster rates among young men and women, and minority groups. That concerns Edna Flores, an AIDS support volunteer from San Francisco who works on outreach programs for fellow Filipino-Americans. AIDS is the number one cause of death for Filipino-American men between the ages of 24 and 35, she said, adding that cultural taboos and the stigma surrounding the disease contribute to the problem.

"If I have one message to Filipino youths and their families out there, it's to be careful, to know that you are not immune from AIDS, because the worst thing for me is to have to bury the young men who are my friends," Flores said with tears in her eyes. "And for those who know someone who is HIV-positive - accept them with love and open arms."

The AIDS/LifeCycle riders will make their way over Highway 1 from Santa Maria to River Park in Lompoc. The ride will conclude Sunday, May 19, in Los Angeles. More than \$4 million is expected to be raised.

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