

Pedaling to a Cure

The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's Team in Training

by Lisa K. Harris

The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's Team in Training participants pedaled in \$1.4 million at last year's UMC El Tour de Tucson presented by Diamond Ventures — and had fun doing so. The funds were used for research, patient services, and education associated with blood cancers, according to Tracy Elliott, Team in Training Campaign Manager.

Seventy-five percent of the funds raised by the Team in Training athletes go directly to The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society with the remaining 25 percent used to operate the program. Last year, 567 Team members participated in El Tour. This year's goal is to have 600 athletes raise \$2 million.

"Wonderful things are happening because of El Tour," Elliott said. "Our fund raising program has helped play a key role in the development of Gleevec, an oral chemotherapy. Gleevec, a pill, has improved the quality of life for many."

First Connection, a peer-to-peer support program for patients and their families, receives funding from El Tour's Team in Training participants.

"The program provides an opportunity to share experiences with someone who has been treated for the same disease," Elliott said. Funds also support the Society's Co-Pay Assistance Program. "There are so many doctors' appointments and medical treatments when you have cancer. The Co-Pay Assistance Program helps defer the patient's out-of-pocket costs."

The Society also develops and offers educational seminars for teachers, nurses, and patients. These seminars are designed for educators and school caregivers who

may have a student being treated for blood cancer.

"The seminars educate teachers and nurses about how to talk with the other kids in the classroom and how to support the sick child and his or her parents," Elliott noted.

Participating in the Society's Team in Training cycling events is fulfilling on a personal level as well. Joining Team in Training is a "fantastic way to meet people," said Kathy Griffiths, Assistant Coach for Cycling, who added that she has made life-long friends raising money and helping people. Griffiths first learned of Team in Training when she traveled to Vancouver, British Columbia, to support her daughter running the city's 1999 marathon.

"I was never a big athlete, but I fell in the love with the cause and wanted to help," she said.

Griffiths, along with four family members, will ride the 109-mile distance in El Tour this year. It will be Griffiths' eighth year of participating in the century ride. She estimated that she and her family have contributed more than \$40,000 to the Society from their El Tour fundraising efforts.

Griffiths has a personal connection to The Society of Leukemia and Lymphoma. Her father, Ken Lyon, died from multiple myeloma, a type of blood cancer, in 2004.

"I ride to honor my dad," Griffiths said, "as well as my husband." Griffiths' husband Bob rode in El Tour for several years

before his death in 2005 at age 58 from a heart attack. This year, the Griffiths family team will consist of Griffiths, her daughter, son, daughter-in-law, and grandson. All will be riding the 109-mile distance.

Griffiths did not think of herself as an athlete before joining the Team in Training program.

"The only sport I participated in was an occasional softball game," Griffiths said, "and the last time I rode a bike was when I was a kid."

The program is designed to "take a couch potato and turn them into an endurance athlete that completes their goals." Since joining the Team in 2001, Griffiths has served as a Mentor and this year she will assist in coaching the cycling team.

"In addition to the great friends I've made, the health benefits have been phenomenal," Griffiths said. "Each time I go for a check-up, my doctor is amazed at what great shape I am in. I feel much better than I did 20 years ago."

"This is the perfect time to join The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's Team in Training," Elliott said. "We started training in August for the 2008 El Tour."

The 12-week program includes individual and group training sessions; seminars on technique, safety, bike maintenance, proper gear and clothing, and hydration and fueling before, during, and after the ride; social events to encourage and acknowledge team members; and

fundraising pointers. "I help everyone meet both their athletic and fundraising goals," Griffiths said.

"Our program starts with a 14-mile flat ride that determines the level of fitness of each Team member," Griffiths said. From there on, the ride distance and difficulty increases at two-week intervals. Team members are placed in groups based on their fitness level and train both by themselves and with others. Two weeks before El Tour, "we top out with a hilly 70-75 mile ride. We figure if you can do that, you can finish El Tour's century ride."

The night before El Tour, the Society hosts a pasta-party with "plenty of great carbs as well as motivational speakers," according to Elliott. One of the speakers is usually a patient or a parent of a patient who relates their story as well as the importance of El Tour as a fundraiser. "It really helps our Team members complete their goals," Griffiths said.

"I'm looking forward to the day when the Society tells me that I'll have to pedal for some other group, because they've found a cure," Griffiths added. Until then, she'll keep pedaling in El Tour's century ride, to honor her father, her husband, and anyone who has been touched by blood cancers. "Watching someone die from cancer is terrible. I have a chance to help. That's why I keep riding."

To join The Leukemia and Lymphoma's Team in Training check out teamintraining.org or call Tracy Elliott at 1-800-568-1372, extension 14.

Lisa K. Harris is a Tucson-based freelance writer.

