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AIDS LifeCycle is A Smooth Ride, Thanks to Dykes on Bikes

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
Wednesday May 31, 2017

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Perspective riders are gearing up for the annual AIDS/LifeCycle, a fully supported, 7-day bike ride June 4-10 from San Francisco to Los Angeles to raise money and awareness in the fight against HIV/AIDS. And behind it all, are the San Francisco Dykes on Bikes® Women's Motorcycle Contingent, ready to dedicate 10 days of their time to ensure that these riders remain safe.

"I got involved six years ago, and found a way that I could give back to the community to help with direct services, to honor people that we've lost in the past to this horrible disease, and to highlight that anybody who thinks that HIV/AIDS only affects gay men is ignorant," said Mindy Dodson, former president of SF Dykes on Bikes and Women's Motorcycle Contingent for the

ride.

Dodson recalled being on the frontline of the AIDS epidemic in the late '80s, and remembers the suffering of friends both core service workers and their families. She recalls the sense of quarantine zones in hospitals and the sense of shame that many families experiences, and remembers how she "got involved because it was important to educate the youth, and have a safe haven to talk about our bodies."



These days, Dodson is surprised by how the diversity of volunteers the event finds, "even conservative straight cowboys from rural towns in Texas."

"I was very inspired by the people who had been involved with the ride as volunteers," she said. "I am impressed by their dedication, commitment and organization, because it's a huge feat to get 2,500 bicyclists safely down the coast of California with 600-800 volunteers creating roving cities with all the facilities: showers, food, equipment trucks, tents."

The SF Dykes on Bikes start on Day Zero of the ride, packing up their bikes independently and preparing the way to stay on the road with the riders, giving them cues about the upcoming road to keep them safe.

Melissa Lawton, an AIDS/LifeCycle Motosafety volunteer, got involved about four years ago as part of the Dykes on Bikes team. She explained how the club rides their motorcycles alongside the bicyclists, and while she hasn't ever had to save anyone, she is always ready.

About 25 of us ride alongside the cyclers and see who might need help," said Lawton. "Unless they need something like mylar blankets, water, or duct tape, we will call dispatch and get medical support. We leapfrog along, and post in places where there are hairpin turns, blind corners, steep hills or crosswalks. We help facilitate them moving down the coast."

Lawton rides in honor of her cousin who passed away from HIV/AIDS when she was younger.

"She was an African-American woman and I am an African-American woman, so being on the ride brings visibility to one population affected by HIV/AIDS that is often overlooked," said Lawton. "HIV is often associated with gay white males, but that is not the only face of AIDS."

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And Dodson has similar reasons for participating, saying, "Every straight person can get HIV/AIDS and every gay person can get it. We all have brothers and sisters, biologically or by choice, and when you are in the midst of AIDS/LifeCycle, you can see, touch, feel, hug, cry and laugh with these people."



Dodson also says that she enjoys the "love bubble" of teasing and innocent flirting that the Dykes on Bikes crew gives Los Angeles LGBT Center CEO Lorri L. Jean along the way.

"We're living in unsettling times when the health care of many Americans, including those living with HIV or AIDS, is at stake," said Jean, who was appreciative of her riders and crew alike. "That's why we're more grateful than ever for the heroes - and

heroes -- of AIDS/LifeCycle who are journeying 545 miles to help end AIDS and care for those living with HIV. They're supporting the Center's many HIV/AIDS-related services, including the free or low-cost health services of our Jeffrey Goodman Special Care Clinic, and our vanguard work to protect people from infection."

Despite remarkable progress that has been made since the disease was first discovered in 1981, the HIV/AIDS epidemic is far from over. Currently there are 1.2 million people living with HIV nationwide and an estimated 39,000 will become infected this year.



Now in its 16th year, AIDS/LifeCycle is a fully supported, 545-mile bike ride that raises important awareness about the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic, in addition to funding services such as HIV testing and screenings for other sexually transmitted infections, HIV medical care, prevention services, and more.

In the seven days it takes the riders to reach Los Angeles, more than 500 people in the United States will become infected with HIV. One out of every eight people living with HIV nationwide is

not aware of their status. Since 2002, when AIDS/LifeCycle first began, participants have raised more than \$236 million and completed more than 58,000 journeys on bikes from San Francisco to Los Angeles.

"This ride is a good representation of who's impacted by this disease," said Lawton. "And if we can get the research funds together to find a cure and make sure these populations have access to PrEP and the treatments that prevent its spread, it's really important to be a part of that. There's nothing else I could do for seven days where 2,000 people thank you every time they pass. It's my dose of gratitude for the year."

For more information, visit <http://www.aidslifecycle.org/>

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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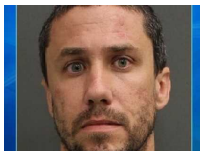
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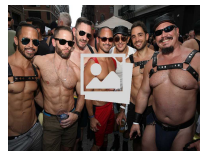
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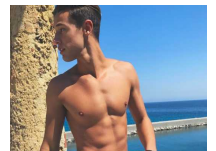
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