



Big check at check-in to Special Olympics at the Switzerland Hotel in North Carolina

THE DREAM RIDE EXPERIENCE

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

More than a million raised for the Hometown Foundation

by Marilyn DeMartini

PALM BEACH GARDENS, FLA., TO FARMINGTON, CONN., AUG. 13–23—While the scenic ride through the Mid-Atlantic States, Blue Ridge, Shenandoah Valley and other heavenly roadways is key, the Dream Ride is more about the people you meet on the way. The bond created between the riders and between the Special Olympics athletes, around whom the ride revolves, is the magic. The magic happens at each stop of the six-day ride, when a party occurs, as medals and T-shirts are awarded to eager, appreciative athletes, awakening a spirit you might not even know you have deep in your heart. The magic is what makes a news anchor cry on live national TV. It's the look of gratitude in the eyes of the athletes' parents as they burst with pride. It is the biker who gives his vest and colors to an athlete who glows while proudly bearing his leathers and it is the lump in your throat as you ride in and see athletes waving signs of welcome with hand-drawn pictures of motorcycles and cars and big hearts. Big hearts—that's a recurring theme at the Dream Ride.

Michael Bozzuto, founder of this 15-year event, is an accomplished busi-

nessman who has a heart as big as his wallet. But he doesn't take credit for the success of his annual fundraiser; rather, he credits all the participants of the Dream Ride—the riders, sponsors, fans and attendees of the three-day event in Farmington, Connecticut, for having "hearts 10 times the size of a normal heart." A big heart and willingness to give and accept a lot of love for an entire week are prerequisites of the Dream Ride. Even big tough bikers are brought to tears as they are bear-hugged by athletes. There are more tears and hugs, smiles and laughter and total joy squeezed into the Dream Ride week than many enjoy in a lifetime.

Bozzuto has raised over \$4 million for the Hometown Foundation, the umbrella nonprofit that funds many local Special Olympics chapters, U.S. military veterans, pet rescues, and cancer and diabetes research. He describes the beneficiaries as the fingers of a hand where the palm pulls them all together; his goal is to pull us all together to raise more money so more athletes can attend the life-transforming Dream Ride.

The Dream Ride has many facets. Starting at the PGA National Resort & Spa in Palm Beach Gardens,

Florida, a send-off VIP party the night before our August 15 departure got the athletes and riders amped up for the week ahead. A group of athletes from Florida Special Olympics, as well as from all the chapters visited en route, attended the Dream Ride Experience in Connecticut, thanks to sponsorships and donations. Energy and spirits were high as newcomers began to feel the impact of gifting T-shirts, medals and money at each

stop. From Saturday through Friday, we were like Santa Claus, traveling from Florida to Connecticut, where the three-day Dream Ride Experience unfolded, including dinners, parties, music, sports activities, concerts—and constant hugs.

Exotic cars joined motorcycles at the Dream Cruise on Saturday evening, the 22nd. Papa's Dodge in New Britain, Connecticut, a retro-themed venue that provides a nostalgic view of automotive history, became party central for hundreds of car collectors; they rolled out their coveted rides to drive enthusiastic athletes, waving wildly to passersby, as they cruised through charming New England towns. Then they headed back to the Farmington Club, where earlier in the day, they played games and fished. There, a festive dinner party provided a place for dancing, laughter and more hugs with a country-western concert by winners of *The Voice* TV show.

Over \$250 million worth of collector and exotic cars started rolling in for the Dream Show on Sunday morning. Ferrari, Porsche, McLaren, Lamborghini and all other exotic and collector brands were gathered under huge tents for a juried show with prestigious judges including Wayne Carini of *Chasing Classic Cars*. Retired racer Skip Barber, founder of Limerock Park and his own racing school, was also on hand, having been given a Dream Ride Hall of Fame award at the Saturday night festivities. And NBA champion Tayshaun Prince also stopped in to hang out and shoot some hoops with mesmerized Special Olympic athletes.

After our group of 30 Dream Riders pulled into Farmington on Friday afternoon, riders from across



Michael Bozzuto leads the Dream Ride



The Dream Ride wave

New England started pouring in for the Sunday Dream Ride where thousands gathered to ride through scenic towns from Farmington and back where a big Dream Ride party and awards presentation unfolded. While only about 40 miles, the police-escorted ride was gorgeous and has become a special event for the communities as people come out with picnics and lounge chairs to watch the parade of colorful bikes. Despite the annoying traffic tie-up, neighbors waved from stopped cars, giving thumbs-up for the special event and Special Olympics.

The child-like innocence and joy of the athletes belie the adult age of most, but Mike Bozzuto is like another big kid as he uses the athlete's awards ceremony to surprise people, often evoking more tears and applause for the good things he does for others. While last year he gave a new Harley-Davidson motorcycle to the Farmington Police to create a bike unit, this year he gifted a new bike to one of the riders who had a mishap on a rain-slicked parking lot, causing considerable damage to his Sportster. But Joe Snyder of Rolling Souls, a small Pennsylvania-based motorcycle club that he founded to help bring various charities together, kept riding and even invited his father to join the ride as it passed near his home. Emotions among the riders ran high when Bozzuto credited Snyder for his stoic riding and charity work and presented him with a new Harley Dyna Wide Glide—and a set of rain gear.

Another surprise occurred when one of the new riding couples, Tom and Helen Shope, who recently lost a special-needs daughter after 25 years of loving treatment for her brain injury, was so moved by their Dream

Ride experience that Tom donated her specially-equipped van. Thanks to his generosity, a Connecticut family who desperately needed the handicapped-enabled transport can now transport their Special Olympics athlete daughter with greater ease. Shope explained with one of his favorite quotes: "Sympathy says, 'I'm sorry,' while compassion says, 'What can I do to help?'"

When meeting disabled athletes like petite Katie Dyer, the magic happens. She was born premature at 14 ounces, fought through her first year of life to achieve 13 pounds, then dealt with lung issues and countless hospital stays and doctors' treatments to make it to 17 years old—and become the leading scorer on her high school basketball team. She looked at Larry Jedrey, an Everett, Massachusetts, cop, with huge eyes and said, "Will you be my friend?" Jedrey melted and laughingly cried, "I'm already your friend!" and the magic continues.

First-year riders Steve and Cathy Kent came to honor Steve's special-needs son who died at the age of four, and to create good energy for their son who incurred a serious brain injury as a U.S. Marine. The love they shared will no doubt come back to them, and hopefully, to their son. Magic and karma have synergy—and that is why we say, "We ride for a reason."

"The athletes were so excited to see the motorcycles! They like getting out and having people accept them and be treated like everyone else," said Patti Wilkerson, a volunteer local program coordinator for Special Olympics of North Carolina, "We want to help people see that the disabled have the



Now *that* is a sweet Dream Ride!

same wants and needs as everyone else. The Dream Ride is awesome!"

We gain so much from the athletes—from their innocence and candor. As DarLing, a lovely athlete from Palm Beach, enthusiastically shared with the crowd at the kick-off party, "If you put 'Go' in front of 'disable' it spells God is Able!"

Those words came to me through some harrowing times on the road—having my bike break down more than once, riding white-knuckled through torrential rain, fighting heavy highway traffic with 30 bikes, trying to stay together while getting sprayed by passing 18-wheelers, I kept thinking, this is all small stuff compared to the problems the athletes face each day. I kept riding, dealing with each challenge and counting my blessings—and I remind myself of that daily.

Although everyone wants to enjoy a great ride, the real goal of the Dream Ride is to get to the destination where eager athletes are waiting. They don't care if we are wet, sweaty and dirty; they just want hugs and conversation—and, yes, medals and T-shirts! But they don't care about the money, though the Dream Ride checks provide more money for uniforms, travel and equipment than these small communities might make from four or five local events. The athletes only know that new friends were coming to see *them*. For repeat riders, it's exciting to see athletes remembered

from prior years—and they remember you, too.

Bozzuto explains, "We all have a friends list—people we can call. The athletes don't necessarily have that, so we become part of their friends list." Though he is a busy executive, he takes delight in getting texts from



Fireman Jeff gets hugs and laughs with Special Olympics athlete at Dream Cruise

athletes when they tell him about the exciting things they are doing because of the Dream Ride. At the awards ceremony wrapping up the 2015 Dream Ride Experience, Bozzuto held up the \$1.353 million check that topped any prior year's fundraising, and said about the Special Olympics athletes, "They have given us the gift to learn from them—we get so much from their love." And to the athletes he tearfully shared, "My life is so much better because of you." 🐾