

The following inspirational article was written by Kenneth Mostello of Carlisle, MA, a member of the Polish Cultural Club of Greater Hartford, Inc.

Why I Ride

In the Spring of 1980, Billy Starr of Wellesley, Massachusetts, had just graduated college and had a dream of backpacking around the world. Soon afterward, though, a tragedy struck that would alter the course of his young life forever. His mother Betty, just 49 years old, succumbed to melanoma, the most lethal form of skin cancer. Billy, always an accomplished athlete and avid outdoorsman, gathered about a dozen friends and decided to organize a bike-a-thon to honor the memory of his mother. Forty years later, that bike-a-thon, now known as the Pan-Mass Challenge (PMC), has grown to become the single largest athletic charity fundraiser in the nation, attracting thousands of riders annually from 44 states.

The PMC is an event that is widely celebrated and beloved in Massachusetts but few outside the state know anything about it. That's surprising, because the numbers are truly astounding. This year the PMC will raise over \$60 million to support cancer research and treatment for pediatric cancer patients. It produces more than half of the money for the entire Jimmy Fund, and it is the single largest benefactor to the Boston-based Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. One hundred percent of donations received go to charity. Operating expenses are covered by rider registration fees, merchandise sales, and by over 200 corporate sponsors, who, along with 4,000 volunteers, provide everything from food and water to logistical support for the 6,400 riders that participate.

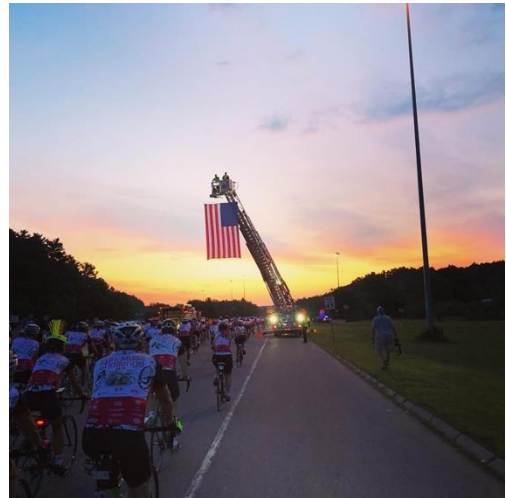
PMC riders are required to do substantial fundraising (typically a minimum of \$5,000) in addition to paying a \$250 registration fee and their first night's lodging. Additionally, participants need a quality, well-maintained road bike and accessories that can add thousands more to the cost of participating. The riders solicit contributions from nearly a quarter million individual and corporate donors. And then there is the challenge of the ride. The PMC offers 12 route options of varying difficulty passing through 47 separate Massachusetts communities. The most difficult is the original 2-day route from Sturbridge in Central Massachusetts to Provincetown on the tip of Cape Cod. Spanning nearly 200 miles with over a mile and a half of hill climbing, the effort is challenging for even well-trained cyclists. Many of the participants are not avid cyclists, however. The event attracts multitudes of cancer survivors and the families and friends of cancer victims. More than just a fundraiser, the PMC has become a catharsis for those who've endured the emotional and physical trauma of battling cancer.

My PMC experience began in 2016. Having lost my own father, Patrick, when he was only 33 to Hodgkins lymphoma, I was no stranger to the traumatic and indelible emotional consequences of cancer loss. I was 8 at the time. Odd as it may seem, I developed symptoms of survivor's guilt later in life. I found myself bitter and remorseful for what I enjoyed and for what my father was denied. I was angry that my mother was left a widow and that my father didn't get to see his children graduate college, get married, or get to know his grandchildren. Those feelings became particularly acute when I reached my early 30's and again years later when my own son reached that age. Now, at age 59, I was confronting my own health issues with diabetic blood sugar levels. I resolved to get control of the problem by losing weight, exercising, and modifying my diet. Cycling was always something I enjoyed, so it seemed like a good idea to become reengaged in that activity. I bought a new bike, joined a bike club, and discovered that many of the other club members were doing exactly what I was doing.

Having spent my entire adult life in Massachusetts, I was always aware of what the Pan-Mass Challenge did and, given my own childhood encounter with cancer, I had an interest in getting involved. In late 2016, I knew I would be turning 60 the following summer, so I decided I was doing the PMC. Participating would force me to train and to train hard. There was no way I was going to do back-to-back "century" rides without months of training. A "century" in cycling parlance is a 100-mile ride, and an effort comparable to running a marathon. Moreover, doing the PMC was going to be an act of defiance. I was not going to be limited or defined by reaching the grandfatherly age of 60. And so, I registered in January to do the classic Sturbridge to Provincetown 2-day ride in August of 2017.

Rider registration begins at 2pm in Sturbridge on the Friday afternoon preceding the weekend ride. When a first-time rider arrives at the front of the line, the registration volunteer makes an impromptu announcement and rings a bell. Everyone in the room cheers and now knows it's your first year. Everything they give you identifies you as a first-time rider. Everyone offers words of encouragement and they all tell you the same thing. You'll be back next year. I was skeptical. I hated asking for money and I doubted my donors would want to give again and again. Besides, I was only turning 60 once.

At 5:15 the next morning, Billy Starr stands high atop a lift in the pre-dawn twilight and offers some final words of inspiration to the assembled throng -- he has ridden every year with the same group of friends since 1980. The Star-Spangled Banner is sung, there's a brief countdown, and 2,500 bicycles converge and squeeze through the exit gate and then turn left on U.S. 20 heading east. In the distance, there's a glimpse of the sun rising above the horizon and nearby the Sturbridge Fire Department has hung a giant American flag high above from a ladder truck. The adrenaline is running. The air is cool and damp. I have butterflies in my stomach and feelings of exhilaration at the sight.



You start out in rural, sparsely populated Central Massachusetts. It's a misty, rainy dawn on a Saturday morning. Then you notice through the receding darkness that the sides of the roadway are lined with people cheering you on. You wonder what motivated these people to get up so early and come out here? You think, "Go back to bed. You don't have to do this. I was crazy enough to sign up for this ordeal, but not you." The crowds grow thicker as the sun rises, and then you begin to understand. People hold signs saying, "I'm a survivor and I'm here because of you." As you start to breathe hard climbing through the Worcester hills, people offer cheers of encouragement and call you out by your name which is printed on a tag on your bike. There's one-on-one banter between rider and these



roadside cheerleaders. The enthusiasm culminates mid-morning in the Cherry Street neighborhood in the town of Wrentham. The local newspaper writes stories about the residents. They hand out food and drink. They dress in costumes. They bring in the high school band, bagpipers, and recently a Vietnamese steel band. The roadside enthusiasts are a constant all day. Riders stop to meet them and pose for pictures. Such zealous displays of

encouragement and camaraderie leave a lasting impression on us. In turn, the riders support the crowds and their loved ones in the fight of their lives. Arguably, the PMC would just be another charity bike ride without these devoted roadside cheerleaders.

The day progresses. By midday, you've pedaled 75 miles and you are two miles from the Lakeville water stop. The hilly Worcester terrain at the onset has yielded to the flat coastal plain of the South Coast. Still, you ache from the miles and the next water stop can't come fast enough. Months of core exercises in the gym have kept your upper body from hurting, but there's no training regimen to prevent a sore butt. It hurts. So, you change position, you fidget, and occasionally you stand on the bike to relieve the soreness. You're focused on your own discomfort and then you notice the pedal partner posters. The PMC operates a program called Pedal Partners that brings together pediatric cancer patients with teams of riders. It's a symbiotic relationship. The riders offer words of encouragement and the pedal partners reciprocate by providing inspiration. As you ride, there's a poster of each pedal partner with his name and picture and his sponsoring team. They line the road, a hundred feet apart for two miles. Many of the kids have lost their hair. Some look gaunt and pale but they smile. You contemplate which ones may have lost their battle by now. Suddenly, your own discomfort is insignificant.

After Lakeville your nose detects the scent of the salt air. Arriving near the seacoast, you know the first day is nearly over. The PMC stays overnight at the seaside campus of the Massachusetts Maritime Academy. I arrive. It's my first year and I'm a bit lost. I eventually find my dorm room. I peel off my grimy, stinky riding kit and grab a warm shower. I've been told to go to the flagpole for the team photo at 4:00. I leave the dorm and find a flagpole. I find out later it's the wrong flagpole and I missed the team photo. Behind this flagpole is a giant poster board entitled "Why I ride". Dozens of poignant messages have been written by the riders honoring those they rode for. I read them. They're deeply personal and I'm moved. It's an epiphany moment. Then someone speaks to me from behind. It's a red-shirted PMC volunteer—one of the thousands. "You need to write something," he says. I demur. I don't contemplate my motivations, and I'm not big on introspection or for airing my personal emotions on a billboard. He persists. "Write something. It's important. You need to do it." And so, I pick up a black sharpie and find an unmarked spot near the bottom. I write "For my father Patrick who died far too young." It was at that moment I resolved to be back next year.

August of 2019 was my third year riding the PMC. I don't know how many more PMC's I'll do, but each year I seem to find new purpose, often born out of misfortune, that motivates me to do it again.



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