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Ride Against AIDS

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Ride Against AIDS

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Biking 4,000 miles across the United States in just three months may seem like a grueling task for most – a task possibly accompanied by dangerous weather conditions, rugged back-roads, and pure exhaustion. As rigorous of a journey as this may be, there are those few strong-willed and committed souls who attempt and succeed at this challenge.

Vadim Kogan and Michael Henry, both members of Illinois Wesleyan University's Class of 2012, attempted this endeavor. This summer they participated in "Ride Against AIDS," a cross-country bike ride for the organization FACE AIDS. Beginning in June, Kogan and Henry started their cross-country bike ride in Half Moon Bay, Calif., and completed their trip in Boston, Mass. in August.

FACE AIDS, an organization founded at Stanford University in 2005, "is a student movement geared towards fighting HIV/AIDS and global health inequality," said Henry. The "Ride Against AIDS," now in its fourth year running, is meant to raise not only funds, but also awareness about the FACE AIDS organization. "We raised over \$50,000," said Kogan. "Individually the riders came up with \$26,000. Along the trip we raised about \$3,000 and there was an anonymous donation of around \$22,000 once we got to Boston."

Accompanied by four other riders, Kogan and Henry's 67-day journey consisted of stops in 20 states and 53 different towns. "We had around 35 host families," Henry said. "So there were 47 days where we had a roof to stay under."

When the riders did not have host families, they looked for RV parks to set up camp. "We would try to stop somewhere where there was a shower," said Kogan, "because by the end of the day sunscreen would stick to your skin like glue."

Though the entire trip was 67 days, the six bicyclists travelled a different mileage each day. An average day consisted of approximately 100 miles– or eight hours of riding. These days were broken up with one or two breaks to eat and rest. "On our longest day we biked 160 miles," said Henry. "We wanted to get to Washington D.C. that particular day, so we took off at 9 a.m. and travelled about 14 hours."



Michael Henry (right) and Vadim Kogan (center) pose for a picture during their cross-country journey.



The bicyclists take a much needed break at the end of a long day of riding.

Throughout the three-month trip, there was always a van following close behind the riders. "If a rider needed a break they drove the van," said Kogan.

The cities that the bikers stopped at, which included Denver, Chicago and Philadelphia, were selected by the FACE AIDS organization. It was up to the small group, though, to create a bike route to get from place to place. "It was usually the riders that would look up the different bike trails that could get us to the next stop," said Kogan. "The most challenging thing was not being able to bike on the interstate, so we needed to look harder for alternative routes."

At each destination Kogan and Henry, along with the other riders, gave presentations educating people on FACE AIDS and helping them understand what they were riding for. "The main point of our presentations was exposing the stigma that surrounds HIV/AIDS," said Henry. "We tried to stress the fact that not talking about the problem only makes the situation worse."

Along with these presentations, the riders visited radio stations, television stations, newspapers, and also did interviews spreading the word about the FACE AIDS cause.

"There are still around 50,000 cases in the U.S. each year," said Kogan. "But the antiretroviral medicines that are available now can allow those diagnosed to live another 27 years, on average. The problem is people still carry that stigma about how HIV/AIDS used to be."

The money raised by the "Ride Against AIDS" is used to help erase this stigma from people's minds, as well as assist communities affected by the disease. "The money goes to a grant program in Rwanda, which offers treatment, prevention, and community development," said Henry. "There are 10 chapters that receive a \$1,000 loan each in order to build up their community."

With money being raised for FACE AIDS, Henry and Kogan commented on how the ride served as an inspirational and rewarding trip. "It made me think about how I am now going to try to live a more passionate life," said Kogan.

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