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'Fat chick on a bike'

Family practice lawyer plans cross-country ride to raise funds—as well as awareness—and to honor partner with cancer

By Tammy Lloyd Clabby, Special to the Daily Report

Amy K. Waggoner, 44, never wanted to become a biker. In fact, she fought it tooth and nail.

"It started in the fall of 2007, when I and three others were planning on a trip to Provence, France," she recalls. "I desperately wanted to hike the trip, but I was out-voted and bike it was."

Waggoner, a partner in the family practice firm Aussenberg Waggoner in Alpharetta, had not been on a bicycle since childhood and had only three to four months to get in shape to ride 25 miles a day in France.

"I went to REI and bought a flat bar road bike. I bought it because I liked the color, green, and started training about 30 to 40 miles a week. The trip was especially difficult because we encountered trade winds, known as the mistral, that occur once every few years. So not only were we riding on mountains in France, but for several days we were riding against very intense winds."

When Waggoner returned from France, she found the desire to keep on biking was strong.

"I started biking more and more, and hanging around bike shops. I had always looked for a workout that would get me out of bed in the morning, and something about biking did that."

By the spring of 2008, Waggoner was logging about 75 miles a week and the self-proclaimed "fat chick on a bike" began looking forward to a long summer of riding.

At the end of May, Waggoner's biking life took on a new and serious meaning. Her 53-year-old law partner, Elyse Aussenberg, was diagnosed with lung cancer. The prognosis was not good and Waggoner was determined to do something to help raise awareness and funds to fight the disease.

"I spent many sleepless nights trying to think what I might do. [Elyse] was very young, very healthy and had never been a smoker. There is no Avon three-day walk to fight lung cancer, but what I decided I could do was to ride a bike to raise awareness."

She and nine friends—lawyers, psychotherapists and stock brokers—formed Team Dream and hatched a plan to ride bicycles across the country to raise money for lung cancer research in Aussenberg's name.

The trip was planned for May 2009. However, concerned that the firm would be without one of its partners at a time when Aussenberg is unable to work, the trip has been delayed until 2010, but the biking has not stopped.

Waggoner recently talked about her bicycling regimen and plans for the cross country trip.

Q: When you decided to make the cross country trip and put in so many more miles, did you upgrade your bicycle, and how did you decide what to pick?

A: I upgraded to the Trek Madone 5.1 road bike and spent about \$3,000. It was painful but totally worth it. As part of the preparation for the trip, I couldn't ride a low-end bike. I figured out four or five brands I thought I would be interested in and then tried them out to see what felt the best.

Q: How did you start bumping up the mileage?

A: In June and July I started a training program, not a formal one, to get up to a level for the trip.

The outfitter who would handle the trip for us has a 10-week training program and in order to do that you have to be able to ride 100 miles a week. I started riding long rides on Sundays and I'm up to about 100 miles a week now.

Q: Where do you ride?

A: It depends on the day. I might ride one to one-and-a-half hours, four days a week, often around town in Decatur. For longer rides I go to Stone Mountain. Or I might go out to Alpharetta and ride out into the country 40 to 50 miles and then ride back.

Q: Why do you call yourself "the fat chick on a bike"?

A: Because I am a fat chick on a bike! I'm in really good shape but you would never know it. My doc says I'll never meet the height and weight chart, I have too much muscle.

Q: Do you watch your weight?

A: I drink too many martinis, and I like really good restaurants! I like being an athlete. I just don't want to be a pro so I don't watch my martini intake.

Q: Are you a gear head?

A: No, not really. I don't want to be my own mechanic. I'm kind of a princess. I can get a chain on if I have to. It's become kind of an expensive habit. I have been threatened with death if I come in with anymore new bike clothes. But I can't buy off the rack. I need specially ordered stuff because I'm too big. They don't make biking gear for fat chicks!

Q: After deciding to make the cross country trip, how did you begin planning it?

A: I began searching the Internet and soon realized the enormity of trying to plan and do it alone is simply too much. There are commercial outfitters who do this and I picked one that could go cross country in seven weeks. Of the nine of us, I will be the only one to go coast to coast. The others will go for different amounts of time. I picked the route that begins in San Francisco and goes to Boston via Los Angeles, Arizona, New Mexico, north to the Midwest and up to Lake Erie, Niagra Falls, and then ends in Boston.

Q: Will you camp out along the way?

A: Some do that and even bring along their own cooks. We'll plot ours so we stop at all good, business-class hotels and nice restaurants with massage available all along the way!

Q: What is the cost?

A: It will cost each of us about \$9,000, not including airfare, or about a couple hundred per day. We each will pay all the expenses for our own trip with 100 percent of the donations going to the National Lung Cancer Partnership. We want to raise \$100,000. That would fund an entire grant in Elyse's name. We will soon begin looking for sponsors and donors and we'll host fundraisers. For a \$2,500 donation, anyone can put their name on our shirt. We'll have official bike jerseys and will take even small donations.

Q: With the ride put off for a year are you still training as hard?

A: I'm still keeping the level high. I did my first century ride (100 miles) this fall. And if the worst should happen, if she dies, it's even more important that I complete the ride. After researching this illness, I was horrified to find what a lack of funding there is for work on this disease, though it is the largest cancer killer of any kind.



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