

Taking his challenge on the road

Village native rides for CF awareness

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What some people view as a disaster or a problem, other people see as a challenge to be overcome. It is this sentiment that has one Ridgewood native battling Cystic Fibrosis (CF) for himself and others affected by this condition.

Brian Callanan, 30, of Burlington, VL, who has dealt with this disease his entire life, is currently on a bike ride from Canada to Key West, Fla. to raise money and awareness for CF and the non-profit organization he established in 2003 called the Cystic Fibrosis Lifestyle Foundation (CFLF).

"I try to utilize it as something like a driving force rather than a problem to deal with," said Callanan. "Seeing it as a challenge really empowers people to live stronger and live longer, which is the motto of the foundation."

According to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, CF is "a life-threatening genetic disease affecting approximately 30,000 people in the United States." It causes the body to produce abnormally thick, sticky mucus that can obstruct the airway and lead to fatal lung infections. This mucus also inhibits the body's ability to absorb nutrients and can block the bile duct in the



GARY JUNG/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Brian Callanan, a Ridgewood High School graduate, cystic fibrosis patient and founder of the Cystic Fibrosis Lifestyle Foundation, is currently riding his bike from Canada to Key West, to raise money and awareness for this genetic disease.

liver. Most patients are diagnosed by the time they are three years old, however some cases are not discovered until the individual is 18. Callanan was diagnosed with CF at birth and it has affected every aspect of his life since he was a child.

Callanan and his team of bikers and support drivers, towing a trailer of food, drink and medical supplies, arrived in Ridgewood on Tuesday, the 11th day of their trip.

A fundraiser for CF, Cycling for CF has raised approximately \$24,000, well on its way to the \$60,000 goal set by Callanan and his crew.

"We have a lot of sponsorship for this piece of the fundraising," he said. "The Sheraton has been sponsoring us, the Skirack, a bike shop up in Burlington hooked us up with all of the repair stuff we might need like tire tubes, tires and

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GARY JUNG/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Brian Callanan and his team are cycling the East Coast from Canada to Key West, Florida to raise awareness and funds for cystic fibrosis. Clockwise from top left: Chris Nelson, a rider and support car driver, Callanan and Stephen Trull, another rider.

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brake pads and cables, chains and a bike rack for the car."

This disease also affects his brother, who is two years older.

"Growing up I was lucky to have parents that were very on top of the medication and the treatments we had to go through twice a day," he said. "Then I became an adult and I had to deal with it on my own, particularly going into college. It was kind of a double-edged sword because if I didn't do it, I would pay the consequences. That transition from being taken care of as a child to learning how to take care of yourself and see CF as a reason to become healthier, rather than as a problem to hide and to deal with."

According to Callanan, this disease and the transition to taking care of himself as an adult has proved challenging.

"There was obviously the physical challenges, which entailed doing chest physical therapy," he said. "That would always kind of get in the way when we were out playing whiffle ball or whatever, we would have to come in and do that. Then there are also medications we had to take with each meal to help with digestion.

"Through high school it really was more of a social and emotional challenge just dealing with things like mortality," continued Callanan. "How do you tell a girlfriend about this or a best friend or a teacher? How do you tell a boss when you get into the working world?"

His time in Ridgewood High School was marked with "significant depression."

During this time in his life, he said he felt overwhelmed by his condition.

"No one I knew my age was asking the questions of, 'Am I

going to live until I'm 25? Am I going to live until I'm 30? 35?'" said Callanan. "My parents, I didn't feel, could understand what it was like to not have anyone else be able to relate to where I was at so I couldn't talk to them about it. It was a very lonely experience."

It was this time in his life that led him to create the CFLF in order to help adolescents suffering from CF through an already difficult period of time. The foundation is in place to help supplement the physiological treatment CF patients get with psychological counseling.

"There's a lot more social and emotional dynamics that go along with it than just the physiological aspect," said Callanan. "The big gap I found in treatment growing up was that when you go to the doctor, that's what they treat, the physiological aspect. They don't ask if you have a girlfriend or how your friendships are going.

"The whole thing is about educating because knowing how the disease works, I really believe, is power," he continued. "Counseling as well, I feel is another key factor. Our funding will also go toward helping families who are not sending kids to counseling because they can't afford it or because the insurance doesn't cover it. We are enabling those supporting factors to create the whole healthy lifestyle."

Helping others to cope with CF and how it affects their lifestyle is actually Callanan's way of coping with it, he said.

"The main way I try to address having CF is by having it at the forefront of my life," he said. "Whether it's maintaining my therapeutic regimen, or being proactive about it, talking about it, sharing with people what my experiences are about it and having a healthy active lifestyle."

So far on this East Coast bicycle ride, Callanan said he is feeling well, although the heat is one concern he faces during this trip.

"Part of the chemical imbalance with CF is an elevated sodium concentration in the blood so when you sweat, a lot more salt comes out," he said. "I have to take salt pills to replace that and keep up with my electrolyte balance and watching my weight.

"Also as an adult – I guess this kind of plays into complications – CF progresses into adulthood and two years ago, I was diagnosed with CF related diabetes," continued Callanan. "That's been gradually progressing and just throughout this trip, I brought insulin to watch my blood sugar. Just the other night I took my first dose of insulin because my blood sugars were way up after a huge carbohydrate meal.

Still, he has been keeping up with his daily health routine and checking in with doctors in CF clinics periodically along his route. He said that CF is still something that drives him forward and inspires him to be a healthier person.

"One of my personal passions is sailing and one of my fascinations with sailing has become the theory of taking a force that should blow you back or knock you over and harnessing it in a way that propels you forward as a driving force," he said. "That's what CF has been for me: I've harnessed it as a driving force, focusing on my health to grow stronger."

Callanan's progress with his team can be seen on the CFLF Web site, cflf.org. The organization is also working on establishing a Pay Pal feature to facilitate donations online.