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The Bicycle Tour Company
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Big wheels keep on turning

By DAVID TOTH



Sal Lillienthal, founder of The Bicycle Tour Company, in the company car.

Playing Frisbee with the boss at a corporate picnic is not the only way to bond with co-workers.

When the Stamford, Conn., law firm of Day Barry & Howard wanted to give summer interns a chance to bond outside the office, they opted for a 10-mile bicycle tour through a mild terrain.

Their guide was Sal Lillienthal, Greenwich, Conn., native and founder of The Bicycle Tour Co. that specializes in corporate bicycle tours.

Based in Kent, N.Y., The Bicycle Tour Co. has pushed its boundaries beyond their area, organizing tours in New York City, Washington, D.C., Fairfield and Westchester Counties as well as Europe.

"We've taken over 10,000 people on trips," said Lillienthal, doing the numbers in his head to sum up the company's activities since its inception in 1997.

A former bike mechanic to Lance Armstrong, Lillienthal was part of the Motorola and Saturn cycling teams that competed in international competitions like the Tour de France in the 1980s.

A mechanic's job is partly logistical, making sure the equipment travels with the race and is readily available for emergencies. "I thought 'wouldn't it be cool to bring Americans (amateur cyclists) to Europe and provide the same service that a professional biker would get,'" Lillienthal said. He had experience in the field, having led bike trips during the summers when he was a student at Hobart College in upstate New York.

Lillienthal's brother, Ryan, suggested he focus on bicycle tours for law firms. "I didn't know what he was talking about," Lillienthal said.

But being a lawyer, Ryan knew law firms have a practice of taking summer interns on outdoor activities.

In 1997, Lillienthal invested \$70,000 and "a lot of sweat equity," bought a van, printed brochures and sent them to law firms. "I got a response from a few firms and now I have a core client group of 20." His clients are law firms in Westchester and Fairfield counties as well as in New York City.

The first tours were in Princeton, N.J., a cycling outing followed by a picnic lunch. In New York City, a leisurely ride through Central Park could be followed by dinner at Tavern on the Green.

Lillienthal provides riders with Cannondale bikes (the bicycle manufacturer is headquartered in Bethel, Conn.) refreshments and a helmet.

He experienced a slowdown in business after Sept. 11, 2001, but said that even in times of shrinking budgets companies have annual meetings and activities are a part of that process.

Lillienthal usually charges \$75 per person and group rates are available.

He said the enthusiasm his clients experience during these trips is infectious. "People are out of the office, it's an environment where they can talk with each other, it provides the atmosphere to really communicate."