

Kent cyclers ride to help the children

Annual 'journey' raises funds for the seriously ill

BY RUTH EPSTEIN
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

KENT — The challenges they face cycling 51 miles are nothing compared to those faced by children with serious illnesses.

Those are the sentiments of participants in the 15th annual "Journey of the Heart" ride for Friends of Karen that took place this weekend.

As they readied for the first day of the ride at the Bicycle Tour Company Saturday morning, Judith Factor, the organization's executive director, explained its mission is to support families with children facing life-threatening diseases, primarily cancer. Six hundred and fifty children from New York, New Jersey and Connecticut receive assistance each year. They are given financial support, illness education, emotional guidance, advocacy and bereavement, she said, by social workers, expressive art specialists and child life specialists.

"We look at the impact of the illness on the entire family," Factor said.

Headquartered in North Salem, N.Y., with 28 employees, Friends of Karen raises about \$4.2 million each year, all through private sources.

The group started many years by Sheila Peterson, who wanted to help her neighbor's child named Karen. The family wanted the



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Cyclists taking part in the 15th annual 'Journey of the Heart' bike ride from Kent to Salisbury helped raise money for Friends of Karen, which raises about \$4.2 million each year to support families with children facing life-threatening diseases.

girl, who had a terminal illness, to die at home, and Peterson helped them with that wish.

Twenty-three riders took part in Saturday's event. Some did an extended loop totaling 70 miles. A few rode again on Sunday, clocking 100 miles, while others who weren't there Saturday got on their bikes for the 51-mile ride to Salisbury and back. Each rider must raise \$2,500.

Factor said they purposely schedule the ride for September, which is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month. "This is just such a devastating thing. It turns families upside down. We've helped more

than 16,000 children since we were founded. No family should ever have to face illness alone."

Among the riders was Theresa Napoli of Valhalla, N.Y., whose daughter Sophia was diagnosed with a brain tumor at age 3. Friends of Karen helped the family and Sophia has been in remission for seven years. "They have been like family," Napoli said. "We can't be grateful enough for everything they have done. I do anything I can to give back, any which way I can get involved."

Paul Smadback of North Salem is the chairman of the 16-member board of direc-

tors. "Friends of Karen does something no one else does for families in crisis," he said, adding he's happy to do his part.

Sal Lilienthal, owner of the Bicycle Tour Company of Kent, helps arrange the ride each year.

As she looked around at the participants joking and laughing with each other before setting out, Factor said, "What we've created is a caring community. In their hearts and souls, they want to help others."

Contact Ruth Epstein at kc-srute@aol.com.