

Teens meet Florida coast-to-coast challenge

By Kristin Friend

Are we crazy? Is this going to be worth it? Will everyone be able to safely complete the ride? Will the cars and trucks drive uncomfortably close to us on the bridges and shoulder-less roads or will they give us three feet as provided by the law? What were we thinking when we decided to lead this trip?

These were some of the questions that filled Gregg Friend's and Randy Clark's mind as they made plans to take a small group of boys across the state of Florida on bikes.

Thankfully, many of these questions and fears were eased when Gregg took a SmartCycling Traffic Skills 101 class through the North Florida Bicycle Club.

Gregg and Randy spent three years mentoring and encouraging a group of eighth-grade boys from their church, Christian Family Chapel. Biking across Florida would be a culmination of these boys' middle school career—a huge accomplishment and something to celebrate as they move into high school.

Five boys signed up for the challenge. One father wanted to ride with them, and a college student volunteered to drive the SAG wagon. So the team would total nine people: eight riders and a driver. The date was set for April 25-26, 2009.

Now, the anticipated weekend had arrived. The training rides were done. The essential gear (ride-whatever-style-you-own bikes, hel-

metts and spare tubes) had been collected and put into a U-Haul trailer the previous night.

At 6:30 Saturday morning, sleep was still in everyone's eyes as they gathered at Gregg's house in Jacksonville. Parents waved goodbye and the team crawled into the van for the ride across the state.

The mood was subdued as they tried to ignore the facts: every hour driven west at 60 mph represented four-to-six hours on a bike for the return trip. Thinking about it was overwhelming. Now it was the students' turn to wonder, "What have we gotten ourselves into?"

They arrived at Cedar Key, unloaded the bikes, and headed toward the water for Photo Time at the Gulf of Mexico! Reality set in as their thoughts swirled: "This is actually happening!" "We are REALLY going to do this!" "Instead of being at home in bed, I've chosen to spend two days on a bike!" The journey began at 10:00 a.m.

The route was along SR-24, going toward Gainesville. They rode 60 miles the first day, taking five rest breaks. An unusual east wind meant the riders rode into a headwind, although it was less difficult than expected. The first day brought one flat tire, but it was a quick 10-minute change. One student got scraped up when he fell off his bike and another courageously biked all day with bad pain in his knee. The end of day one's ride was through the University of Florida, which was fun for the Gator fans in the group.



The coast to coast team lines up at the Atlantic Ocean finish line. They rode just shy of 146 miles in two days to get this picture. We believe they did some other fun stuff, too. Read the story.

Chris, the SAG driver, was a wonderful servant, going ahead of the group on each leg of the trip to set up a table, put out drinks and snacks (bananas and freeze-pops were a huge hit), make lunches and set out chairs for the bikers to rest and rejuvenate. He gently coaxed the hot, tired boys to eat when they needed to.

At the end of day one, Chris drove the group to their hotel where they swam and showered, then drove them to an Outback Steakhouse for dinner. The riders were thankful to be off the bikes and to enjoy a good

meal. Everyone was tired and in bed by 10:00 p.m. except Chris, who stayed up to wash the biking clothes.

Sunday morning, they were back on their bikes by 8:00 a.m., riding east on SR-26. Everyone expected to be sore and dead-tired but were surprised that once they got on the bikes, they felt ready to go.

Happily, the first three legs passed quickly. The group turned north onto SR-21, then east onto SR-16. This road held their next sur-

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