

PH Patient Kathy Morton and Friends Cycle Across Iowa

Kathy Morton has endured ups and downs living with PH, but that hasn't kept her from taking on some tough challenges. "Sometimes what appear to be really big hills don't turn out to be that bad. Other times, hills that appeared small turned into the biggest obstacles," she says.

Kathy is talking about the *Des Moines Register's* Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa (RAGBRAI), a weeklong bike ride she completed this July. RAGBRAI is the oldest, largest and longest bicycle touring event in the world.

The whole journey was 406.6 miles, with overnight stops in designated towns across the state. Kathy averaged just under 60 miles a day, braving steep inclines, headwinds and the summer heat.

Cycling friends Arek Wdowiak and Michelle Eggert joined her on the journey, and Kathy's husband Joel Morton and friend Rebecca Bidleman followed along in an RV. "I can't begin to list all the people who are involved with RAGBRAI, from the planning stage, to the towns, to family members and co-workers," Kathy says. "With PH we also have teams of healthcare workers, family and friends among others who help us."

Kathy was diagnosed with pulmonary hypertension in June 2005, only a few months after she started experiencing symptoms. She had been taking a tae kwon do class with her children since the previous year. By the spring of 2005, she started feeling breathless and dizzy during workouts.

"It seemed odd that I was more out of shape after several months than I was when I started," she says.

After undergoing a series of tests with her primary care doctor and cardiologist, she was diagnosed with PH and now sees a PH specialist in Chicago. She had mainly been taking subcutaneous treprostinil until January 2012, when she joined a study that is still ongoing to test an implantable pump.

She attributes her quality of life to early diagnosis and treatment. "I work full time as a high school teacher, exercise regularly, and experience a virtually symptom-free life," Kathy says. "Early diagnosis has allowed me to call the shots in my life, rather than PH."

During RAGBRAI, she made sure to pace herself and drink a lot of water. If it got too hot, she would stop to cool down.



Left: Riders make their uphill ascent on day 2 of RAGBRAI. The 83-mile trek from Harlin to Perry, Iowa, was the longest stretch on this seven-day journey. **Right:** Kathy Morton (center) dips her bike tires in the Mississippi River, marking the finish line in Fort Madison, Iowa. Along with Arek Wdowiak (left) and Michelle Eggert, the trio was among thousands of cyclists who participated in RAGBRAI.



Kathy, along with many other riders, chose to walk, rather than bike, up some of the particularly steep hills.

"If you need to stop and catch your breath, it's OK," Kathy says. "You don't have to prove anything to the world. All that matters is that you know you are doing your best."

RAGBRAI is a statewide tradition among Iowans. The bike route changes from year to year, allowing eight towns to act as "host" communities where the riders stay overnight. The cyclists ride anytime between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. through each day of the event and are met with evening entertainment in each host town.

Many Iowans show their hospitality to the RAGBRAI participants — Kathy observed people letting the riders use the bathrooms in their homes, while other families sold or gave away water, Gatorade and snacks from their driveways. One family allowed riders to jump in their swimming pool as they passed by.

Kathy, who now lives in Peoria, Ill., is proud to call herself an Iowan, having grown up in the Hawkeye State. As a child, the RAGBRAI route stopped in her hometown of Ames several times, and she got to see the riders in person — it's an experience that always meant a lot to Kathy.

Now that this great bike ride is over, she is already contemplating the next adventure, be it a trip to Japan or biking through wineries in Spain. "There is hope," Kathy says. "PH doesn't mean the end of your life." ♦

You can read Kathy's diagnosis story at:

www.SometimesItsPH.org/KathyMorton

Learn more about RAGBRAI: www.ragbrai.com

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