

Healing Rides Program Continues To Help The Disabled Get Back On The Constitution Trail In 7th Year

By Luke Smucker

As the snowy winter weather slowly transitions to spring growth, the desire among people to be out in nature grows exponentially. While many local residents can simply put on a pair of shoes and jacket and go for a stroll, there are also those who require additional compensation for their safety, such as the disabled and the elderly. In an effort to help these individuals get out and explore the beauty of the world around them, Barbara Brown has overseen the creation of the Healing Rides program.

For the past seven years, Healing Rides, a free community service, has offered two specially adapted Bike/Wheelchairs to help folks in Bloomington/Normal get out on the Constitution Trail for some fellowship, fresh air, and sunshine. The program has three objectives, to provide fresh air and sunshine for our riders and volunteers, encourage socialization and relationship building, and improved mood for all.

"I really want to emphasize that this program is led by something much bigger than me," Brown said. "I may have thought it up, but this program has been driven by a higher power. The first year we did 80 rides and each year that number has continued to grow. I would guess we've given maybe 600 to 800 rides in total - it's just so joyful. Last year was our biggest year and I believe it's because people were just craving to get outside."

Brown, herself, was once craving to get outside. In 2012, she was diagnosed with cancer and became quite ill and quite weak. Prior to that time, she was a bicyclist and walker.

"My diagnosis made me realize that there are a lot of people out there who have issues with mobility, either due to illness or age, who would still really enjoy being outdoors," Brown said. "That thought really motivated my desire to serve. Cancer was not a good experience for me, but I wanted something good to come out of it and that's how I came up with the Healing Rides program."

The year 2012 was all surgery and treatment for Brown. Then, in 2013-14, she and her husband Steve were focused on recovery because Brown was still very weak.

"It took a long time to come back and I had a hard time walking because I had neuropathy in my feet for my treatments, but bicycling I could do," Brown said. "So, that year, I entered an essay contest sponsored by The McLean County Wheelers Club. They chose my essay and I got a brand new bike (which I still have to this day) and that's how I built my strength up. Then, I found out about the Nantucket Wheelers and it just seemed to all go together."

Brown met a woman in Nan-



Barbara Brown, right, Founder of Healing Rides, is looking forward to the program's 7th year this spring.

tucket, Darcy Creech, who had started a program called Nantucket Wheelers. Creech gave Brown the motivation she needed to get a similar program started in Bloomington.

"Once she had given me the idea, I thought it would be no problem at all; I would just come home and start it," Brown said. "However, there was a lot more work than I initially realized; I needed bicycles, volunteers, and storage space."

The very first thing Brown did was find a place to store the bikes. She spoke with Erik Prenzler, who has storage space right on the Constitution Trail and agreed to give Brown free storage for her bikes. The biggest problem Brown faced, after creating the program, was getting people to ride.

"I had no idea that people wouldn't ride, it didn't ever occur to me," she said. "So, what I ended up doing is going around to the different nursing homes and assisted living facilities. I would ask their activity directors to ride with me. They were in the wheelchair and I would take them on a ride and show them what the experience was like. From there, they would go back to their clients and set up some rides with interested people."

That's how Healing Rides got started, back in 2015, with just a few riders at a time. Over time, it got notoriety and people began to

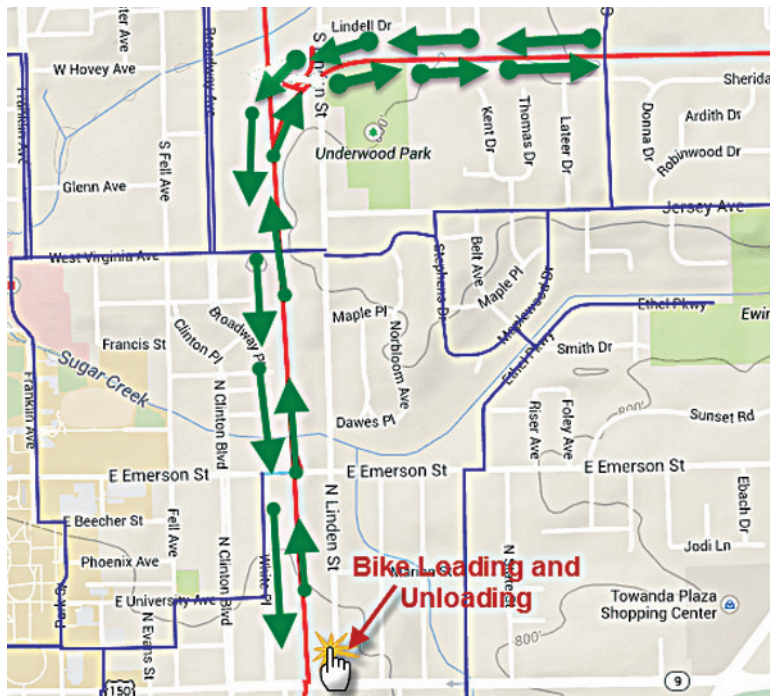
see the special bikes on the trail and recognize the Healing Rides name.

"I did a lot of leg work, but it was exciting to me, so it didn't feel like work," Brown said. "This is my passion, so I was glad to do that and continue to do public speaking events about Healing Rides to this day."

The Healing Rides program only has two bikes. Originally, the program had raised enough money for one bike (roughly \$10,000), but when Brown and her husband, Steve, drove out east to pick it up, the salesperson told them that someone else had donated another bike anonymously. So, they had to bring both bikes back, which Brown said was "a great problem to have."

"We started with the Duet Wheelchair Bicycles, but we found that they weren't as sturdy as we needed them. So, then the whole process of raising money started over again," Brown said. "The first two bikes were donated to us, so we donated them to families with disabled children. So, those first two bikes have been given to families and now we have the OPairs, which are wonderful."

Manufactured in the Netherlands, the OPair is a multi-speed, tandem tricycle with electric-assist pedaling. The trikes accommodate a wheeler weighing up to 225 pounds and a pilot weighing up to the same weight. The e-ass-



This map shows the route on the Constitution Trail that peddlers take during a Healing Rides activity. Ride time is typically around 45 minutes.



Healing Rides is a free community service offered in Bloomington/Normal Illinois. The program gives everyone the opportunity to get out on the Constitution Trail for some fellowship, fresh air and sunshine. Rides are offered Monday through Friday at 1:00 and 2:00 PM from June 1 through the end of September. Call Wesley Methodist Church at 309-827-8046 to set up a ride today.

sist is useful both when pedaling for hours at a time – sometimes with heavy passengers – and when going up hills. E-assist also means volunteers of all ages and athletic abilities can train to be peddlers.

The program was led by God and several generous people who volunteered their time and resources free of charge. These include Wesley United Methodist Church, Home to Healing Rides; Barb Brown, Healing Rides, Founder; Beth Sennett, Web Developer @ Simply Sennett; Chris Knudson, Logo Designer; Erik Prenzler, Donator of Bike Storage; and Bloomington Cycle and Fitness, provides discounted maintenance.

Currently, Healing Rides has 20 volunteer peddlers. Volunteer training sessions are conducted in the spring and all volunteers take an online class through Wesley Methodist Church called "Safe Gatherings" before they can volunteer. Although a lot of people want to volunteer as peddlers for the program, Brown is very selective on whom she chooses.

"I find that some people want to do this for the wrong reasons," Brown said. "They may just want to add volunteering with this program to their resume, but that's really not the purpose of this. Or, they may want to do this as a way to get exercise, but that's also not the purpose. The purpose of this program is people. They have to love other people and have a heart for those with disabilities and the elderly. They also have to be available at the times that we ride, we don't want to train someone and have them only ride one time. However, many of my volunteers have been working with us since the beginning. They are very dedicated and they always say they look forward to it."

From June 1 through the end of September, Healing Rides are held Monday through Friday at 1 and 2 p.m. The first ride starts at 1 pm and then comes back by quarter til 2. Then, the volunteers pick up another two riders and go

for another 45 minutes and the bikes are back in their storage by 3:30 pm.

During the rides, there is a lot of communication between the guest and peddler.

"A lot of seniors don't get to speak to anybody all week long. Or, maybe they've told their story a thousand times to somebody," Brown said. "But, our peddlers can provide a fresh set of ears. They want to hear about the riders' lives. We don't rush, we go really slowly and we stop for animals, birds, and dogs. People on the trail also get to know us and when we're going to ride, they know to come out and greet us, which creates a great social environment for everyone involved."

Families of the rider are asked (but not obligated) to ride along, instead of sending somebody on a ride by themselves. The family member can either ride in the other bike or bring their own bicycle along.

"I love it when whole families come and ride along with us," Brown said. "If we know it's going to be a family, we'll try to do something special like stop for a picnic lunch or get some ice cream or do something special."

Riders are not limited to one ride per season. Some community members have signed up for a ride every week. Brown says over time they become like family to the volunteers.

"I always tell our guests, you do not have to just go once," Brown said.

To sign up for Healing Rides, call Wesley Methodist Church at 309-827-8046. Or, to find out more about the program, visit www.healingrides.com.

"This will be our seventh year," Brown said. "I really want to emphasize that this program is led by something much bigger than me. I may have thought it up, but it has been driven by a higher power. I want it to be known that this program is not about Barb Brown, it is about something much bigger."