

THE RIDE OF SILENCE

May 21, 2003
by Chris Phelan

White Rock Lake, 7 pm

They began gathering at 6:30. The start wasn't for another 30 minutes. It was an unusual day and time to have a bike rally, a Wednesday, at 7pm. But this was an unusual gathering of kindred spirits.

Ten days in the making, The Ride Of Silence came together at White Rock Lake's Tee Pee Hill paddle boats, under the banner of remembering those that have been killed on the roads. Though the ride was inspired by the most recent death of endurance cyclist Larry Schwartz, it welcomed runners and anyone else who shares the road, and therefore risks life and limb, with motorists.

Though bikers go no slower than farm equipment and are no smaller than motorcycles, there is a slaughter taking place on the roads we have a legal right to share with motor vehicles.

As cyclists representing various clubs and teams from the Metroplex (Plano Cycling & Fitness, Cowtown Area Mountain Bikers Association, Tri Dallas, Lone Star Works, Richardson Bike Mart, Tri Cowtown Triathlon Club, Mirage Cycling Club, Texins Triathlon Club, Baylor/Tom Landry Cycling Program, Fit2Train, Jack Johnston Bicycles, Ft.Worth Bicycle Assoc., Dallas Athletes Athletic Club, Greater Dallas Bicyclists, Dallas Off Road Bicycle Assoc (DORBA), The Matrix Cycle Club, Plano Bicycle Association, Moritz Chevy Crew) gathered in hushed tones, the atmosphere was different than your typical race or rally. Cyclists greeted one another from other teams and factions. Old friends re-united and new ones were made. Instead of Type A behavior, one could easily see a different side to the cycling community, one that had to come to mourn the loss of loved ones, dear.

A flurry of e-mails went out beginning May 12 announcing the chance for all that share the road with motorists, to come together to speak volumes in silence; to gather and ride,

instead of with speed, and noise, to ride with restraint and silence. There would be no registration, no fee, no sponsors. There would be, simple, a ride in silence.

This was unprecedented, and some questioned its value, purpose, and validity. And whether it could happen.

It had rained most of the day. Some e-mails and phone calls were fielded about the ride still taking place. Yes, it would, went out the message.

An estimated 1,000 cyclists and some runners came together under cloud skies, comfortably cool temperatures, and dry streets. Channel 33 was on hand to film the event and do a story. The Texas Racing Post, and The Phast Times News were also on hand, along with Judith Jolly to represent her fiancé who inspired the ride.

A few words were spoken of why they had gathered and strict instructions to ride no faster than 12 MPH. The front of the pack was asked to block, and hold the rest of the pack back. A volunteer Police escort with Officer Pat Cheshier, lead the cyclist, after they were allowed to “proceed when it is safe do so.”

And then it started. Mountain bikes, tri-bikes, roadies, tandems, and recumbents. An older man riding a traditional bike with red high tops. In a deafening silence, all began rolling clockwise around the 10 mile loop, with most wearing black arm band to memorialize those that have fallen, and red arm bands for those that have either been injured or harassed by a motorist.

The air became thick with emotion, as once steely competitors remembered those that have died doing something they loved, or remembered how close they had come to death on a past ride. One man was crying; several were moist with sadness. The rest wore sunglasses. In silence, they rode as one, remembering those that have gone before, themselves, and each other.

Going around the first bay on the west side allowed the opportunity to turn back and look at the stretch of bicycles, all riding deliberately slow. People on the sides on the road, stopped. You could see them whisper to each other. They knew something significant was happening, but weren't sure what. They were used to seeing large packs of 20 or so cyclists hammering along this popular lake, yelling out commands, with abandon and disregard for any spectators on the roadside. But this was different. These cyclists said nothing. There was a complete and enormously powerful silence that

gripped hearts and emotion. There speed of such restraint, it immediately told any bystander that something was being said, that a statement was being made.

By the time the riders made it to Mockingbird Land to cross the bridge over White Rock Lake, it was obvious the event was working. Cyclists were seen hugging, shaking or holding hands, or giving a nod that meant solidarity as they rode in the quiet.

Though there was no brochure, poster, or clothing associated with The Ride Of Silence, the impact that was made was crater sized, in the otherwise materialistic world of Dallas' TV remotes, cosmetic surgery, SUV's and personalized licensed plates.

Once on Mockingbird bridge where cyclist and motorist merge, even the motorist seemed to "get it" for the moment, that something different was happening. It was the tail end of rush hour, and yet the cars and traffic were slowing for riders.

At Winfrey Point, one could look back north to the back of the pack coming out of Sunset Bay, then look south along the Arboretum to the spillway on Garland Road, and see a continuous line of bikes that stretched to almost a mile, longer than the peloton in the Tour d'France.

We had strength in numbers. We were unified over the one thing that brings us all together: death. Our own or someone we are close to. As Mike Keel pointed out, everyone out there is someone's daughter, son, father, mother, or grandparent.

There is the realization we all just one ride away from death despite our safety record. This is, after all, the one sport where one must be concerned about being killed before they can enjoy, learn or excel. A poignant point. Just as Larry Schwartz was obsessively safety conscious, so is the school bus driver who has just left off his cargo for the morning. And yet, these two collide and one dies as a result.

The camaraderie among the cyclists this hour, went beyond being seen and demonstrated. It was so palatable, it was felt by those who stood on the side, as well as the occasional rider who pulled to the side to take pictures, wait for someone they wanted to share this special moment with, or just take in the significance of the event.

The list of groups endorsing the ride was enormous at 41. Groups as diverse as Dallas Aquatics Masters, the Corpus Christi South Texas Runners, Bikers, and Swimmers, Thurston Racing, The Cross Country Club of Dallas, USA Triathlon – South Mid West,

and For The Love Of The Lake. Groups such as The Texas Health Club, Plano Kawasaki Suzuki Aprilia, Health & Fitness Magazine, the Dallas Area Galloway Marathon Training Program, The Texins Triathlon Club, Coit Chiropractic, DH Sports, The Dallas Police Department, Craig Miller and The Ticket, Carl Woodard Associates, and Bikes On A Mission who stood behind what the ride was standing for, and that could understand the venerability of the lone athlete training in their environment. A real sign of import was the endorsement from The Texas Bicycle Coalition, whom Schwartz himself had requested donations be made to in place of flowers.

The sun was starting to the western horizon as the bikers made their way off the bike and foot bridge at Garland and Winsted Roads. The police had again made it possible to allow the cyclists the right of way, allowing the two wheeled vehicles to continue on their way, uninterrupted to White Rock Trail, without traffic coming off Garland Road. Since the cyclists were a large enough group, the stop signs were legally suspended during the ride.

A large green SUV found it necessary to have to pass the cyclists along White Rock Trail before Williamson. The SUV entered the left hand lane and began passing at a high rate of speed endangering his life, his wife life sitting next to him and the hundreds of cyclists who had the legal right of way. He went on without incident.

Toward the end, before the ride ended, a yellow shirt was spotted on the back of a rider. In memory of Schwartz, in said it all. "Life is short. Ride far."

At the paddle boats, the riders hugged and comforted each other, thanking one another for being there this day and on other rides past and future. Hands shaking, smiles and hugs were easy and freely given out. Larry Schwartz did not die in vain. Hardly. "He'd be smiling down us right now," said cyclist Keith Hester.