

NEWS

## Cyclists' long trip raising awareness

**KRISTEN LANDREVILLE** Special to The Sun

Published 12:01 a.m. ET May 22, 2003 | Updated 2:01 a.m. ET May 22, 2003

Getting up at 5:30 a.m. to crisscross the state at an average of 70 miles a day on a bicycle is not a walk in the park. But for about two dozen fraternity members from around the country, that hard work pays off.

The Pi Kappa Phi fraternity members - undergraduates, graduate students and alumni - pedaled into Gainesville on Wednesday to kick off a day of disability-awareness events at the Downtown Community Plaza.

The 26 cyclists were on day 11 of a two-week, 800-mile trek from Miami to Tallahassee that is expected to raise more than \$75,000 for projects associated with helping people with disabilities.

Supporters of the "Gear Up Florida" trip greeted the cyclists.

"This was a good idea and a great experience to see the cyclists," said Imani Ayobunmi, a resident services worker with the Arc, a group that helps the development of people with disabilities.

Ayobunmi said it was coincidence that she and about 20 people from the Arc were there to witness the event.

The cyclists were also excited.

"Everyone's changed on this trip," said Michael Chioffe, a 22-year-old University of Florida student and cyclist. "You start to see people for who they are and not what disability they have."

Each cyclist trained differently in preparation for the long journey. They were required to keep training logs to track their progress and to be sure they wouldn't overexert themselves on the trip.

Chioffe said he trained three to four times a week, but it's the friendship among the cyclists that keeps him going.

"It's a team effort," Chioffe said. "We're all on the mission together."

Michael Smith, a 25-year-old graduate student at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, said there is a sense of camaraderie among the cyclists.

"For the most part, we were strangers when we started," Smith said. "Now, we're extremely close."

Gainesville Mayor Tom Bussing also was there to greet the cyclists.

"For seven years they've been making this ride, and I think it's an outstanding contribution to people with disabilities," Bussing said.

On Wednesday evening, the cyclists were scheduled to attend a dance with people who have disabilities at Tacachale, a facility that is home to about 500 people with disabilities in Gainesville. Tacachale also will let the cyclists sleep in their auditorium for the night.

Gear Up Florida, in its seventh year, was sponsored primarily by Saturn and organized by the fraternity's national organization Push America, which began in 1977 and has raised more than \$8 million.

