

Whitney Pier born doctor building healthier communities a bike ride at a time

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Cheticamp's Gayle Bourgeois, who decided to get active four years ago, participated in her first HeartLand Tour bike ride on July 9 — a round trip journey from Sydney to Louisbourg. (Andrew Rankin)

Gayle Bourgeois finished half of the 100-km bike tour she had hoped to finish on July 9.

But that really didn't matter.

Not to the Cheticamp resident, or to the 70 or so others she joined as part of the HeartLand tour team that braved wild winds to trek from Sydney to Louisbourg and back.

For Bourgeois, who drove a couple of hours from home to join the crew in Sydney, it was a moment that was four years in the making.

Back in 2010, she simply knew she needed to get healthier. That meant getting active. She started walking, then hiking and at last biking.

On the advice of a friend belonging to the HeartLand Tour crew, which is simply a team of health enthusiasts travelling across the province promoting healthy living in conjunction with community bike rides, she decided to take the plunge.

"I didn't make it the entire way so I took the truck back," she said. "The main thing is that I tried. It was a wonderful experience. Everyone was really supportive and encouraging."

When the crew rolls into town next year she's determined to do it again, except complete the entire route.

Whitney Pier native Dr. Nick Giacomantonio is the man behind the team that started out in Yarmouth on July 6 and then onto six other communities: Bridgewater, Truro, Sydney, Antigonish and New Glasgow, finishing up in Halifax on July 12.

The Halifax based cardiologist, who participated in each ride, said Bourgeois' performance remained one of his personal highlights of the Sydney tour.

That she was merely participant was inspiring enough for him.

"That's what we're after, just encouraging people to lead healthier, more active lifestyles," he said. "The bicycle is the vehicle we use as a means to inspire that change."

In its eighth year running, the annual event isn't politically driven, nor is it a fundraiser. It sustains itself on donations.

In his job, Giacomantonio continually bears witness to the ravages caused by inactivity and poor lifestyle.

“The amount of people at risk of diseases, the amount of disease in this province is unfortunately scary,” he said. “But the risk factors are risk factors that we can change. High blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity, inactivity, smoking; all these things.

“Changing those risks changes the disease. For me, it’s about cardiovascular disease prevention. My agenda is to have good programs in eve major community. One of the ways to do that is to stimulate the public. Every event is about lifestyle and change. In order to set about change, there has to be changes in attitude, behaviour and culture.”

Many of his patients come to him in dire form carrying a pack cigarettes. It’s not uncommon for him to witness people celebrating an angioplas or bypass surgery with a doughnut and Tim Hortons’ double-double.

“I see it all the time!”

That’s why a part of the crew’s work is about partnering with politicians and business people and getting into community institutions, trying to make a difference.

Giacomantonio visited his old stomping grounds, joining Whitney Pier Youth Club for a bike ride.

Despite the uphill battle he faces, he’s reminded that his work is making a difference.

“Emphatically yes,” he said. “People come up to me and say ‘I saw you guys last year and I decided that I wanted to do something so I could ride with you this year.’ ... People come up to me who have had angioplasty and say ‘Remember me, I was in the coronary care unit. I just war to say thanks. This is a great idea.’”

In many cases it starts with baby steps.

“Say to yourself I’m going to Open Hearth Park and I’m going do that loop around the soccer field,” Giacomantonio said. “Pick a goal. Set your goal to be part of the tour next year.”

“Say to yourself, I’ll walk this year, then I’ll cycle and maybe join Velo Cape Breton. You gotta a pick a goal.”

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