



# Arriving last—and winning

Cancer survivor Devon Fagel completes a 100-mile ride for Smilow Cancer Hospital.

**WHEN DEVON FAGEL**, 34, heard about Closer to Free: A Ride for Smilow Cancer Hospital at Yale-New Haven, he said, “Count me in.” He didn’t care that he hadn’t ridden a bike in 15 years, that he hadn’t trained at all and that he didn’t have a racing bike. And there was one more thing he wasn’t going to let stand in his way: the fact that he had just come off a grueling year battling oral cancer. The Redding, Connecticut, resident felt he needed to be part of Team PACT, one of the teams cycling in the fundraiser, no matter what.

Parenting at Challenging Times (PACT), a new program offered at Smilow, offers guidance and support to parents with cancer who are concerned about the impact of their illness on their children. On the day the program began in June 2010, Fagel was the first patient to walk through the door. He had just learned his diagnosis a few moments before, and his first thoughts were for his family: How would he tell his wife, Michelle? How would his children, Lila Vivi, then 5, and Atticus, then 2, cope?

“I thought my life was over, but the

most difficult part was not the physical part; it was the anxiety and fear for my children. Dr. Martin, the PACT program director, calmed me down, and then spent the rest of the day helping me figure out how I was going to talk to my family.” He and his family continued to seek guidance from PACT throughout Fagel’s treatment. Today, he is cancer free.

Riders in the Closer to Free fundraiser could choose one of three courses: 25 miles, 65 miles or a 100-mile route. Fagel decided that even if he only made it a few miles, he was going to support the orga-



Devon Fagel receives hugs and congratulations from his daughter, Lila Vivi, and his son, Atticus, at the finish line.

ter how well he did, I knew that it would be important to him to show that he still had strength,” says Michelle.

Fagel made it to the rest stop at the 25-mile mark, where cyclists could end their rides or continue on to one of the longer routes. Fagel sent Michelle a cellphone photo of himself, pointing to a longer route. “At that point, I knew he was going to do the whole 100 miles,” she says.

The other members of Team PACT finished the 100 miles in six hours, and gathered at the finish in the Yale Bowl where all the riders, sponsors and volunteers were celebrating. They assumed that Fagel had done his 25 miles and gone home, when they heard an announcement over the loudspeaker: “A few riders are still coming in and a cancer survivor is still out on the course! Please wait to cheer him in.”

It was Fagel, steadily pedaling on. When Team PACT heard that, they rode back to find him at the 90-mile mark. The whole PACT team completed the last ten miles together. After 12 hours, Fagel—the very last rider—arrived at the finish line to thunderous applause and screams. Michelle was crying, and Lila and Atticus were shrieking, “Our Daddy is a hero!”

“This is a perfect example of how we don’t leave any patient to struggle alone at Smilow,” Thomas J. Lynch, Jr., MD, physician-in-chief, Smilow Cancer Hospital, and director, Yale Cancer Center, told the crowd. “We’re all fighting this disease together.”

Team PACT raised over \$10,000 that day. But more important to Fagel was the fact that his children watched him triumph over cancer—in the bike ride and in his own health. He says, “For our children to see that Daddy is a survivor and a fighter made a world of difference for them. And for me.”



When Guido Wollman (left), MD, PhD, and Closer to Free ride marshal captain, heard of Devon Fagel’s (right) decision, made at the 25-mile mark, to continue on to the 100-mile route, Wollman vowed to accompany Fagel for the remaining 75 miles, and never left his side.

nization that had made such a difference in his family’s life. On September 10, he took his ancient bike and joined his fellow PACT team members: Dr. Martin; Ryan Blum, a Yale University Medical School student; and Joseph Cohen, Dr. Martin’s brother-in-law.

Michelle and the kids were there to cheer him on. “He made the decision to participate a week prior to the actual race, and I knew most people had been training for months. So yes, I was concerned. However, there was another side of me that was excited for him because no mat-



#### BY THE NUMBERS

On September 10, 2011, hundreds of cyclists, volunteers, friends, family and supporters came together for a common goal: to raise money for Smilow Cancer Hospital at Yale-New Haven. Their efforts raised over \$430,000 while creating greater awareness for cancer care throughout Connecticut and Southern New England. Here’s a wrap-up of the first annual ride.

**251**  
riders

**345**  
volunteers

**19**  
towns on the 100-mile route

**17,000**  
combined miles cycled

**430,000**  
dollars raised for Smilow Cancer Hospital

**800**  
ounces of peanut butter consumed

**175**  
loaves of bread eaten

**600**  
gallons of water consumed

**9.8.2012**  
second annual Closer to Free Ride—  
be there!

Visit [rideclosertofree.org](http://rideclosertofree.org) to learn more.





(above left) Michelle and Devon Fagel and their children with Team PACT and ride marshal captain Guido Wollman

(above right) Mark Reitsma, Closer to Free cyclist and Smilow patient (profiled in the last issue of *Impact*) completed the entire 100-mile ride, raising \$6,000. "It's the least I could do to give back to Smilow since they have helped me way beyond my wildest expectations," he said. "Today I feel great."



(photos left) There were countless moments of pride, triumph, gratitude and a host of other emotions throughout the day. These photos capture just a few. Visit [ridecloser2ofree.org](http://ridecloser2ofree.org) to see hundreds more.



Please lend your support to PACT (Parenting at a Challenging Time) to help families get through the toughest challenge they will ever face. Make a contribution today at [ynhh.org/donate/PACT](http://ynhh.org/donate/PACT). Or call 203.688.YNHH (9644).