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**Don't Let This Be Your Greatest Adventure:
Extraordinary Experiences and Personal Transformation**

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**Don't Let This Be Your Greatest Adventure:
Extraordinary Experiences and Personal Transformation**

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Dedication

To my parents, who have wholeheartedly supported my pursuit of education and athletics, and my family, who taught me to do so with passion.

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**Don't Let This Be Your Greatest Adventure:
Extraordinary Experiences and Personal Transformations**

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Sport providers should be concerned with the participant experience, and in particular extraordinary experiences, as they have the potential to shift participant behaviors and attitudes to those desired by sport organizations. Extraordinary experiences are characterized by interpersonal interactions, separation from the usual, and feelings of self-transformation or personal growth (Arnould & Price, 1993). Due to the power, intensity, and transformative effects of these experiences, they can generate lasting shifts in beliefs and attitudes (Schouten, McAlexander & Koenig, 2007). This research project examined the relationship between the extraordinary experience and the personal transformation by examining the characteristics of the experience and impacts on participants.

Texas 4000 is a community of cancer fighters who “train, fundraise, educate, and bring hope to those with cancer” for one year before their experience culminates with a 4,000 mile bike ride. University students apply to participate, and once accepted they begin planning, fundraising, volunteering and training for their ride to Alaska. Along the ride, they interact with members of the communities they pass through to spread “hope, knowledge, and charity.” Over 400 individuals have completed the ride within the last ten

years. For this study, alumni participated in in-depth interviews about their experience and how it impacted their life.

Participant impacts included feelings of empowerment, new perspectives and appreciations, a sense of meaning and purpose, and strong relationships that resulted in a sense of community with other riders, the organization, and the larger cancer community. Importantly, participants' history and backgrounds influenced how participants interacted with the community and the impacts that they felt. Additionally, the extraordinary experience of the ride created enduring change in participants; the preparation for the extraordinary experience was not as impactful and merely allowed participants to develop the necessary skills to participate in the summer ride.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Personal change rarely happens without a decision by the individual to change. Yet, there are experiences that impact individuals in such a way that it is difficult not to be transformed. For example, students who study abroad often return home feeling transformed by their experiences; mountain biking and skydiving can provide an extreme experience that impacts individuals; and river rafting allows for teamwork towards a greater goal that affects participants. The ability for an experience to transform an individual is rare, and extraordinary experiences don't happen every day; indeed they are often sparked by rare and unusual events and tremendous emotional intensity that would overwhelm us if experienced every day (Arnould & Price, 1993). However, the impact of these experiences can result in a lasting shift in attitudes and behaviors (Schouten, McAlexander & Koenig, 2007)—in other words one actually can be transformed by an experience. Coping with the loss of a loved one, coping with the diagnosis of a serious illness, traveling to foreign countries, escaping every day life through activities like river rafting, and other such experiences allow for individuals to consider new perspectives and views (cf. Arnould & Price, 1993; Kleiber, Hutchinson & Williams, 2002).

Extraordinary experiences, despite the variety of activities that could produce them, are generally characterized by unusual events and a sense of newness, high levels of emotional intensity and experience, interpersonal interaction and connectedness to larger phenomena beyond the self, and feelings of self-transformation and/or awakening (Arnould & Price, 1993; Schouten et al., 2007). These feelings of self-transformation are important to understand because the changes in attitudes and behaviors that result affect not only the individuals, but also their

social relationships and relationships with organizations. Personal transformations are “dynamic, uniquely individualized process(es) of expanding consciousness whereby an individual becomes critically aware of old and new self-views and chooses to integrate these views into a new self-definition” (Wade, 1998, p. 716). Because one has a new self-definition their behaviors and attitudes change to align with this new self-definition, and these changes are likely to affect their relationships with others and organizations in both positive and negative ways (cf. Mezirow, 1978; Schouten et al., 2007; Wade, 1998).

Extraordinary experiences are important for organizations to understand because they have the capacity to build a sense of community among consumers (Underwood, Bond & Baer, 2001). Marketing scholars who have examined this sense of community have discussed shared group experience in general as one of the main markers of how consumers identify with a community and claim that the community that can be built through these experiences, as they contribute to strong relationships between the consumers, and between the consumer and organization (cf. McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002; Schouten et al., 2007; Underwood et al., 2001), and potentially increase satisfaction, loyalty, and advocacy (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). Yet, it remains unclear what components of these group experiences actually contribute to a sense of community, and to what extent this experience needs to be extraordinary. For sport organizations, in particular, that are struggling to attract engaged fans or participants, understanding what makes an experience extraordinary, offers the chance to provide a shared group experience and personal transformations that could create loyal, satisfied consumers who have a strong relationship with the community.

Participating in training groups for a cause, such as Team in Training or Team Livestrong, can be extraordinary experiences for many, as they allow for a sense of newness, high levels of emotional intensity, interpersonal interaction and connectedness to larger phenomena. These training groups provide training plans, coaches, or other types of support for a variety of events (such as, but not limited to, marathons, triathlons, and century rides) in exchange for help fundraising for the non-profit organization (Leukemia and Lymphoma Society). They have been extremely successful for many organizations—for example, Team in Training has raised over \$875 million in 25 years with 570,000 participants (Leukemia and Lymphoma Society). In addition to serving as a fundraiser, these events can also be successful opportunities to raise awareness for the cause (Filo, Funk & O'Brien, 2010; Scott & Solomon, 2003).

Participatory charity sport events are organized in a variety of formats, from one-day events (e.g. the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure) to months- or year-long training and fundraising programs (e.g. Team in Training), for a variety of different causes. Many are walks or runs, but other sports include cycling, triathlon, and jump rope (Run Walk Ride Fundraising Council, 2013). Organizations may offer coaching and training, a chance to travel to different locations, the opportunity to reach athletic goals, and connections with those affected by the cause—an opportunity that the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society claims is “the experience of a lifetime.” Indeed, many participants have expressed gratitude for the opportunity and stated how it has been life changing for them personally (Leukemia and Lymphoma Society). Yet, there remains little research to substantiate what characteristics of participation provide opportunities

for extraordinary experiences, how these characteristics build a community, or how individual lives are impacted by the experience (including the community surrounding it).

This study will begin to fill that gap by examining the experience of participation in a charity sport training program and how the experience has impacted participants. Additionally, this study will begin to provide an understanding of what elements of group and extraordinary experiences allow us to feel a part of community. Understanding this could help sport managers understand sense of community in sport, how people are transformed through sport, and how impactful that transformation is, allowing them to replicate some of the elements of the experience for their benefit. Research in this area could help the non-profit organizations utilizing sport training groups as a fundraiser and, universally, almost all organizations. Because fundraising and earning money are key to non-profits and organizations, it becomes necessary to understand what the participants experience is, and how that experience affects participants, especially regarding the organization's goals. Extraordinary experiences have the power to influence behaviors and attitudes, create long-lasting effects, and develop strong emotional ties to the individuals and organizations that facilitate the experience making it essential to understand these experiences (cf. Schouten et al., 2007).

PURPOSE

Through interviews with Texas 4000 alumni, the potential impact of the experience on the current lives of former Texas 4000 participants will be examined and described. Texas 4000 is a community of cancer fighters (all University of Texas at Austin students) who train, fundraise, educate, and bring hope to those with cancer. They spend at least a year fundraising for cancer research, as well as training and planning for a bike ride from Austin to Alaska (over

4000 miles). Along their ride, they stay with hosts in many communities that allow them to share their message with community members along their route. It is the longest annual charity bike ride in the world, and to date has raised more than \$3.5 million for the fight against cancer. The qualities of this experience make it an ideal setting to study extraordinary experiences.

To this end, the purpose of this study is to describe the experience of participating in a cause-related sport training group and the effects of participation experiences on participants through the individual's own reflections on the experience and the meanings they ascribe to the experience. The relevant research questions are:

- What are the characteristics of the experience participating in Texas 4000, as described by the participants?
- How do program alumni perceive the impact of the experience on their lives?

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Over 400 alumni have participated in Texas 4000 over the last ten years, providing a large group with a variety of experiences. Participants will have had differing amounts of time to reflect on their experience allowing for a better understanding of how the impact might change over time. Overall, the interviews will provide an understanding of how the experience has had an impact on participants' lives, and how that impact changes over time. It will contribute to the body of literature examining transformative experiences by providing information on actual impacts on participant lives and how they potentially change over time. For sport management, specifically, it will begin to fill the need for detailed, descriptive information about the actual experience of participating in training groups for a cause, the elements of the experience that lead

to the building of a community, and the characteristics of these programs that allow for extraordinary experiences and whether they result in a long-term transformation.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

To understand how participation in a training group for a cause can be life changing, the experience of participating must first be understood. Only, then can the impact of the experience be examined and understood, and implications for sport managers and charitable organizations developed.

Experience

The concept of experience is imprecise, as many academic disciplines have their own approach and definition. Science, for example, views experience as providing knowledge—either for the individual or for all societies, while in philosophy, the experience is viewed as a personal trial that generally results in personal transformation due to internalization of knowledge gained through the experience (Carú & Cova, 2003). Sociology and psychology view experience as an individual development activity that is subjective and cognitive, and anthropology views experience as something that happens to the individual, not others, and how they interpret internally and express these events (Carú & Cova, 2003). Despite these differences, it is clear that the experience is an important part of any discipline. Although these definitions represent a wide range of disciplines, similarities include the individual and internalization of their experiences, indicating the importance of the individual and the process of reflection.

Important kinds of experiences to consider that can have an impact on individuals include peak experiences, flow experiences, and peak performance. Maslow (1964) describes peak experiences, or experiences of highest levels of happiness and fulfillment that are intensely emotional. They are uncommon events. Flow experiences, however, occur when intrinsic joy in

an activity is experienced, and is often associated with play and not unusual (Csikzentmihalyi, 1975). Finally, peak performance, as defined by Privette (1983), refers to episodes of superior performance (such as physical strength in a crisis or prowess in an athletic event), and is again unusual. Taken together, these three require attention and focus, and include joy and valuing of the experience (albeit at different levels). The attention, focus, joy and valuing all lead to memorable experiences, but are not common. The value of this work lies in the description of some of the types of experiences that have an impact on individuals—important to understand if one is hoping to provide an experience that will allow for a change in attitude or behavior that benefits an organization.

EXPERIENCE IN A CONSUMPTION CONTEXT

In consumer behavior, experience is vital to understand because of its centrality to the consumer and to the relationship between consumer and organization. In contrast to the traditional approach of information processing, in which the consumer thinks logically about their purchase decisions, the experiential view considers the consumers “subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses and esthetic criteria” (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982, p. 132). With regards to the basic consumer behavior model of environmental inputs and consumer inputs, intervening responses, and output consequences, there are key differences between these two viewpoints. From the information processing view, products have a useful function that can be evaluated objectively and whose attributes can be communicated verbally; consumers can be described on demographics and psychographics whose tasks are to solve a personally relevant problem through the purchase of a product and allocation of their monetary and time resources. The intervening response system consists of a

complex knowledge structure accessed through conscious thought, its comparison to other products (attitude and preference), and the choice process. Finally, the consequences of the consumer choice relate to function of the product, which relates to repeat purchases (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). While this model has many merits and can help researchers and practitioners alike, it does not consider the whole picture and importance of other consumption phenomena.

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) argue that the variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic response, and esthetic criteria associated with the steady flow of fantasies, feelings, and fun of consumption are also essential to understanding consumer behavior. They term this, the experiential view. The symbolic meaning of the product should be considered, in addition to the tangible benefits mentioned above, especially in leisure research where consumers tend to have high levels of interest and involvement. Consumers' subjective time allocation regarding discretionary time is relevant to consumer inputs, as is the excitement and expected hedonic response of product consumption, and various personality and subculture traits. Intervening responses should also include subconscious and private processes such as fantasies or daydreams, the entire range of emotions (and not just preference or attitude), and the actual consumption of the product (in addition to its purchase). Finally, output consequences that derive from enjoyment and pleasure for the product itself, and not solely its usefulness, should not be neglected; neither should the associations one has with a product—the imagery, daydreams and emotions that can have important impacts on future decisions (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

Carú and Cova's (2003) definition of consumer experience is founded on Holbrook and Hirschman's (1982) work in which an experience is "above all a personal occurrence, often with

important emotional significance, founded on the interaction with stimuli which are the products or services consumed” (p. 270). These experiences can be central pieces of a consumer’s life, and can result in transformation if the experience is extraordinary (Arnould & Price, 1993). The experience goes beyond the pre-purchase and post-purchase activities, and should include the pre-consumption experience, purchase experience, core consumption experience, and remembered consumption experience (Arnould, Price & Zinkhan, 2002). The prepurchase experience occurs in response to a problem or desire and includes the search, thoughts, feelings, and images surrounding the anticipated experience, and may not actually result in a purchase (Arnould et al., 2002). The actual purchase experience refers to the choice, the payment for, and packaging of the experience, while the core consumption experience includes the transformation, sensation, and satisfaction/dissatisfaction (Carú & Cova, 2003). Finally, the remembered consumption experience refers to reliving a past experience through narratives and discussions with others. This model extends the consumption experience beyond the shopping encounter to include many of the other activities that influence consumer decisions and actions.

The remembered consumption experience is important to the consumption model described above, as the time for reflection on the experience was important to internalization (Arnould et al., 2002; Carú & Cova, 2003). Indeed, Carú and Cova (2008) emphasize the importance of reflection as a tool for understanding consumption experiences as “consumers caught up in a gripping experience are incapable of directly verbalizing everything they sense whilst involved in an activity or concentrating on a task” (168). This is not to say that every experience is gripping, but that the need for reflection is vital to understanding the consumer’s experience.

This argument for the consideration of the experiential aspects of consumer behavior, in addition to the more traditional information processing perspective, is certainly applicable to the service industry and sport. In the hospitality and tourism industry, which in many cases includes sport, companies are looking to differentiate themselves on the design and delivery of service experiences. These experiences can be seen as the opposite of every day life or a temporary event in order to experience change (Walls, Okumus, Wang & Kwun, 2011). Factors impacting the hospitality and tourism consumer experience include physical and human interaction elements, individual characteristics, and situational factors (Walls et al., 2011). These factors are certainly also important to understand in the sport experience as well. For example, sensory information can influence the consumer experience through the physical environment and interaction with employees (and arguably other consumers) shapes the human interaction elements. In sport, this might be the music played during an event, the smell of concession-stand food, interaction with stadium ushers or race volunteers, and interactions with fellow fans and/or participants. Individual characteristics and situational factors generally can't be controlled by an organization, and include personality type, purpose of the trip, and travel companions (Walls et al., 2011). In sport, these elements are certainly present and should be considered when examining the experience.

EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES AND IMPACT ON AN ORGANIZATION

Not every experience can be memorable, and mundane experiences are vital to the consumer as they supplement the exciting or intense experiences to provide a more complete and balanced view of the product or service (Carú & Cova, 2003). However, extraordinary experiences, in addition to ordinary experiences, can provide a more complete understanding of

the consumption experience. Arguably, extraordinary experiences have gained greater attention in the literature due to their potential for impact on consumer behaviors and attitudes.

Extraordinary experiences are memorable and intense, and unusual, similar to peak experiences, flow experiences, and peak performance; while ordinary experiences occur in everyday life and are characterized by the passive acceptance of events (Abrahams, 1986).

Extraordinary experiences can have a profound impact on participants, as one key component is the transformation of self. These experiences are triggered by unusual events in which interpersonal relationships are extremely important, and many individuals felt a sense of self-renewal and transformation as a result of the experience (Arnould & Price, 1993). Sense of newness and high levels of emotional intensity are also characteristics of extraordinary experiences. They differ from flow experiences due to the intense level of emotions felt, and do not imply superior performance or independent relational modes, which are necessary for peak performances and peak experiences.

As in any experience, extraordinary experiences are influenced by expectations, the actual event, and the reflection on what happened. In Arnould and Price's (1993) ethnographic study of river rafting, they found that participant narratives centered around pilgrimage, intensification and rediscovery of self, and communion with nature and others. Participants had vague expectations regarding the trip, perhaps due to limited knowledge of what to expect or desire to preserve spontaneity. The experience itself brought forth themes of communion with nature, connecting to others that brought forth feelings of belonging and group dedication to a larger goal, and personal growth displayed through acquisition of new skills and new jargon and feelings of place and purpose. Finally, upon recollection of the experience, participants

described the difficulties of reentry into the everyday world and were reluctant to engage in cognitive recall, perhaps because the “river magic” would be lost if the feelings and sensations were examined too closely. While river rafting is one type of experience that can be extraordinary, the themes found here may be present in other leisure or sporting activities and the overall model of expectations, experience, and reflection should be considered.

In particular, extraordinary experiences differ from other consumption experiences in regards to expectations and satisfaction. It is hard to determine what consumption experiences might lead to intense emotions of extraordinary experiences, even if that is what one is searching for; the influence of others on the experience is unpredictable; and extraordinary experiences are spontaneous (Arnould & Price, 1993). Satisfaction with the extraordinary experiences differs in that normally, satisfaction is described as a performance summary of an experience’s various attributes, while extraordinary experiences are evaluated across the temporal frame of the whole experience within the context of an individual’s overall story (Arnould & Price, 1993). Also, there is little correlation between expectations and satisfaction regarding extraordinary experiences due to the vague expectations and the complexity of satisfaction.

For the river rafters, the “magic” had a power that allowed them to return to their everyday lives, transformed; however, more research is needed to explore the effects of these experiences on future participant behaviors (Arnould & Price, 1993). Schouten, McAlexander, and Koenig (2007) took up this call for more research, and described the power of extraordinary experiences to generate enduring changes in consumers’ beliefs and attitudes. Transcendent customer experiences are a type of extraordinary experience that take place in a consumption context and consist of three main characteristics—feelings of self-transformation, separation

from the ordinary, and a feeling of connection to larger phenomena. Other markers can include “emotional intensity, epiphany, singularity, and newness of experience, extreme enjoyment, oneness, ineffability, extreme focus of attention, and the testing of personal limits” (Schouten et al., 2007, pg. 358).

There are several differences between transcendent customer experiences and extraordinary experiences. First, transcendent customer experiences are a peak or flow experience in a consumption context, while extraordinary experiences have characteristics of each type of experience but do not meet all the criteria to be considered peak or flow experiences. Also, extraordinary experiences are not tied or related to a specific brand, while transcendent customer experiences are. Despite these differences, the effects of these experiences can be lasting because of the power, intensity, and transformative effects of the experience—transcendent or extraordinary. In the marketplace, transcendent customer experiences have been evident in hospitality industries (Pullman & Gross, 2003) and have shown the potential for positive brand associations and customer attention.

In addition to enhanced relationships with brands, transcendent customer experiences can also have an impact on a consumer’s relationships with other individuals, objects, activities, values, and symbols (Schouten, et al., 2007). As Arnould and Price (1993) demonstrated with their study, extraordinary experiences in consumption contexts have the ability to facilitate consumers’ relationships with other consumers (even forming temporary communities), their service providers, specific places, and more broadly, nature. Other researchers support these findings with their studies of extraordinary experiences in other contexts, such as mountain biking and skydiving (cf. Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993; Dodson, 1996).

Understanding extraordinary experiences becomes important for managers and researchers alike as understanding the triggers of, roles played by, and kinds of transcendent experiences can help managers provide the necessary components for transcendent experiences, and thus the benefits that may come along with them (Schouten et al., 2007). It is necessary, first, to determine if consumers have transcendent or extraordinary experiences, and what impact these experiences have on consumers. Only then can managers begin to ask what they can do to help consumers achieve these experiences.

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATIONS

One characteristic of transcendent customer experiences that deserves more attention is the feelings of self-transformation, as it involves a change in self-views that impacts attitudes and behaviors of the individual, which can have a larger effect on others and the organization. This could be of particular interest to managers and organizations as the transformation could positively or negatively impact their goals.

Transformation generally refers to a restructuring or forming over. In personal transformation, this restructuring or forming over comes in the form of one's self view. Wade (1998), after reviewing literature from the behavioral sciences, education and health sciences, defined personal transformation as a "dynamic, uniquely individualized process of expanding consciousness by which one becomes critically aware of old and new self-views and chooses to integrate them into a new self-definition" (716). The process does not follow a linear path and requires the time and ability for self-reflection. It serves as a clear, concise definition for the types of transformation that was discussed in terms of extraordinary experiences and transcendent customer experiences. These experiences could be one trigger for expanding

consciousness and becoming aware of new self-views, however the experience literature described above fails to fill the gap of how one chooses to integrate the new self-views into a new self-definition.

Wade's (1998) view of the process of personal transformation is initiated or preceded by an event that disrupts an individual's life and disorients them, such as a stressful life experience, relationships with others, exposure to a new environment, or even a book. Essentially, these events present a dilemma in which one's self-view is challenged or threatened by a new or different viewpoint, and an individual is faced with the choice to attend to the dilemma or ignore it (Wade, 1998). When one makes the deliberate choice to address the dilemma, and the subsequent decision to shift from old ways of knowing to new, more inclusive, differentiated, and integrated self-views, a transformation has occurred (Mezirow, 1991). The transformation may then be followed by feelings of excitement and satisfaction with the new perspective, in addition to sadness at the loss of the old self-views.

Mezirow (1978, 1991) provides more insight into transformation by accounting for cultural and contextual factors. Mezirow, admittedly, is describing perspective transformations, defined as a structural change in the view of ourselves and our relationships; these views are based on meaning perspectives—"the cultural and psychological assumptions that have influenced the way we see ourselves and our relationships and the way we pattern our lives" (1978, p.101). However, the perspective transformation is similar to personal transformations in that it involves old and new self-views that are in conflict and require a change. His description of the process begins with the meaning perspectives that individuals have, or the structural cultural assumptions that influence our self-views; when these assumptions are made clear,

individuals shift their meaning perspective that can have consequences on personal and social priorities (Mezirow, 1978). The old meaning perspective no longer adequately deals with a situation because one is now conscious or aware of the old perspective and the new options and constraints, attained through taking the perspective of others. This mechanism (taking other's perspective) allows for a personal transformation. Our cultural assumptions "may be reflections of economic, political, social, religious, occupational or educational systems" that can influence our psychological assumptions (Mezirow, 1978, p. 104).

In addition to cultural assumptions, context must be considered. Historical context and social context, for example, can provide for differing experiences and thus transformations (Clark & Wilson, 1991). Others shape individual's construction of self, which cannot be ignored (Clark & Wilson, 1991). With this understanding, meaning perspectives are derived from the cultural context in which they are developed, and a change in context can result in a change of meaning. Thus, both culture and context can influence the transformation process in terms of opportunities to consider others' perspective, the time frame by which change may occur, and the original and new perspective one may take.

Both perspective transformations and personal transformations are important when considering the effects on attitudes and behaviors. The experience can be one mechanism for producing a transformation, especially if the experience includes social interaction and is out of the ordinary, as in extraordinary and transcendent customer experiences. Social interaction and unusual events can introduce individuals to other and new perspectives. However, this work has not been examined in sport event contexts (or in charity sport event contexts, for that matter), despite some empirical work that has demonstrated that leisure or sport can be a vital component

of the coping and self-transformation process through its opportunity to provide new self-views and interaction with others (cf. Kleiber et al., 2002; Lundberg, McCormick, Taniguchi & Tibbs, 2011; Shehu & Moruisi, 2010). Yet, sport events, as experiences, could be one context that allows for transformation, and should be studied in order to understand the limitations of a one-time intervention on the transformation (e.g. in terms of extent of the transformation, the length of impact, and the impact on others).

If an experience allows for personal transformation that benefits the organization (as well as the consumer), it is important to understand what about the experience facilitates the transformation. Extraordinary experiences are triggered by unusual events—events that may allow for personal transformation by exposing individuals to new perspectives. The importance of interpersonal relationships to the experience can also be vital to personal transformations. Finally, the importance of context to personal transformations provides the need to examine the transformation in a sport and extraordinary experience context. One characteristic of these experiences is personal transformation, but more research needs to be conducted to examine what about the experience facilitates the transformation, the characteristics of the transformation, and the impact of the transformation on individuals and organizations.

CAUSE-RELATED SPORT AS A CONTEXT

Sport events could be one context for studying personal transformations as a result of extraordinary experiences. Characteristics of sport that allow for both extraordinary experiences and personal transformation include the potential for doing something unusual (especially if one has never participated in the program or sport before) and the interpersonal interactions. Sport opportunities that allow for different modes of participation or bring together individuals with

different identities and level of involvement with the sport may allow for more interaction with others that introduces individuals to new perspectives (cf. Scott & Solomon, 2003; Snelgrove & Wood, 2010). Charity sport events are one type of sport opportunity that, in addition to new perspectives and exposure to something new, have added meaning that has the potential to impact the participant experience in a way that has previously remained unexamined.

While sport alone could provide these experiences, the addition of a charity can add meaning to the event through the camaraderie, cause, and competency experienced (Filo, Funk & O'Brien, 2009). Feelings of belonging and solidarity represent camaraderie—belonging to something larger than themselves (which should be noted is a characteristic of transcendent customer experiences); cause allowed participants to go beyond the typical physical challenge of sport events by allowing them to make a difference in the world and inspire others; and the physical challenge was something that many felt they wouldn't normally do, adding meaning to the event through competency (Filo et al., 2009). These themes show that the event can take on emotional, symbolic, and functional meaning for participants; while both competency and camaraderie may be experienced through other sport events or programs, the addition of cause clearly contributed to the symbolic meaning of the experience through their expression of their alignment with the cause (Filo et al., 2009).

Participants in these events often have a personal connection to the cause (Scott & Solomon, 2003), but others identify much more with the sport or equally with both the sport and cause (Wood, Snelgrove & Danylchuk, 2010). The identities of participants can affect not only their fundraising efforts, but also their length of involvement with, or commitment to, the event; higher identity with the cause led to more money raised, and higher identity with both the cause

and the sport led to longer involvement with the event (Wood et al., 2010). However, the differences between market segments (based on identity) should not be seen as a sign that only high-involvement supporters should be targeted. Instead, events that attract a wide variety of market segments can be seen as an opportunity to introduce low-involvement supporters to the mission and needs of the charity (Peloza & Hassay, 2007).

Charity support behaviors are one way of identifying high- and low-involvement supporters. High-involvement supporters can be characterized by citizenship behaviors (behaviors that require one's time and energy) such as volunteering, referrals, and gifts-in-kind; financial contributions such as gifts; and/or purchasing behaviors, such as purchasing of charity products, and participation in charity events and cause-related marketing programs (Peloza & Hassay, 2007). Low-involvement supporters can be characterized by community service (volunteerism that is required, not voluntary) and recycling; purchasing behaviors (as described above); and/or financial contributions for the functional utility offered to the donor—such as tax deductions (Peloza & Hassay, 2007). While many of the behaviors are similar, the differences between types of supporters lies in the degree of involvement with the charity and the meaning of the act of support for the donor. For example, a donation of a gift-in-kind by a high-involvement supporter differs from a donation of unwanted goods by a low-involvement supporter lies in the desire to support a specific charity that may align with the individual's personal values versus the desire to get rid of unneeded goods to any charity that will accept them. Charity sport events are one context in which low-involvement supporters of the charity (those who identify more highly with the sport) and high-involvement supporters of the charity (those who identify more highly with the cause)—and vice versa, for low- and high-involvement

supporters of the sport—can mingle and share their perspectives, potentially allowing others to incorporate these new perspectives into their current perspectives. This could result in low-involvement supporters integrating the perspective of high-involvement supporters into their own meaning perspective and affect their behaviors and attitudes and behaviors in a positive manner towards the charity or sport. However, there is also a potential for the opposite to happen, which while undesirable for the managing organization could provide more insight into the influence of the experience and others' perspectives on transformations and impacts of these transformations.

While not all low-involvement supporters can be transformed into high-involvement supporters, charity or sport organizations should make every effort they are capable of to facilitate transformations. At charity sport events, the opportunity to build a brand community is one strategy that organizations use to attempt to build support. Brand communities are “specialized, non-geographically bound communit[ies], based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Identified by three markers—consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility—brand communities around charity sport events are not automatic. Woolf, Heere and Walker (2013) found that one event did not serve as a brandfest because it failed to increase involvement or identity of the participants with the charity, but, they argued that the potential remained for brand community to be developed through establishment of traditions and/or rituals, showcasing organizational history, and facilitating group experiences of members who identify with the charity.

To move individuals into existing brand community requires a gradual personal transformation as motives change and commitment deepens (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

Hassay and Peloza (2009) suggest two learning mechanisms by which brand communities might develop around charitable organizations: cognitive-learning and behavioral learning. A brand community that develops after brand-passionate consumers increase their involvement with the brand is one established through the cognitive learning mechanism, while the behavioral learning mechanism begins with involvement that leads to a perceived sense of community and then identification with the brand (Hassay & Peloza, 2009). Experiential events, such as charity sport events, can cultivate both types of learning by allowing for the development of social ties vital for sense of community; these social ties can be among like-minded, strongly-identified individuals or not-yet-identified and strongly-identified individuals. Those who aren't yet identified may undergo a transformational process in which they experiment with the charity brand identity, conformity and identification, and mastery and internalization of the identity (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Charitable organizations need to leverage their events to foster sense of community, enhance identifications, and encourages involvement in the cause—as suggested earlier this could include creation of rituals and traditions (Hassay & Peloza, 2009). In essence, charity sport events can act as a brandfest, and as Schouten, McAlexander and Koenig (2007) suggest, the hallmark of a successful brandfest and key to a strong brand community (such as one around a charity) are the facilitation of transcendent customer experiences. These experiences, of course, are characterized by personal transformations, and thus brandfests and brand communities must be considered as one factor that could affect personal transformations.

To summarize, participation in a participatory charity sport program is a consumption experience. While these programs seem to provide many of the factors necessary for an

extraordinary, or life-changing, experience, there is no evidence to support this assumption. If participants in these programs do have an extraordinary experience, the factors that facilitate personal transformations should be examined for their impact on the participant and the organization. Accordingly, the following questions will guide this research project:

1. Can participation in participatory charity sport programs result in an extraordinary experience?
2. What characteristics of the experience facilitate personal transformation?
3. How does the experience and transformation impact the participant and the organization?

Chapter Three: Method

In order to understand the participant experience, semi-structured interviews asked participants to describe their experience and interpret the impact, if any, it had on their lives. Each individual was asked to reflect on expectations, the pre-experience, the consumption experience, and the personal transformations they feel occurred, if any. The impacts, or personal transformations, and experiences are highly subjective (cf. Carú & Cova, 2003; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Mezirow, 1978; Wade, 1998). An interpretivist approach was deemed appropriate for this study, as interpretivism refers to strategies, which “interpret the meanings and actions of actors according to their own subjective frame of reference” (Williams, 2000, pg. 210).

PARTICIPANTS

Texas 4000 describes themselves as a “community of cancer fighters,” who “train, fundraise, educate, and bring hope to those with cancer” (Texas 4000). The organization was founded in 2003 and is the longest annual charity bike ride in the world. Participants in Texas 4000 are University of Texas at Austin students who spend a year fundraising for cancer research, volunteering at community events, conducting community programs to raise awareness for cancer research, and training for the culminating event of participation, a more than 4,000 mile bike ride from Austin to Anchorage. Participants are undergraduate and graduate students from a wide variety of majors at the university. Four hundred seventy-one University of Texas students have participated in Texas 4000 in the past 10 years (since its creation in 2004). Alumni riders were targeted for this study, as they have had time to reflect on and internalize the

experience (cf. Arnould et al., 2002; Carú & Cova, 2003). Consumers may get caught up in the experience, while it's happening, and be incapable of verbalizing their thoughts, emotions, etc. until after some time has passed (Carú & Cova, 2008).

All alumni riders, who had successfully completed the ride to Alaska, were asked to participate in interviews. The only eligibility criteria was that they must have completed the ride and be willing to participate in the interviews. While all Texas 4000 alumni were asked to participate in the study, the goal number of participants was thirty to allow for data saturation. Considering the nature and scope of the study, study design, it was estimated that thirty participants would allow for richness of the data and an understanding of the experience (Morse, 2000). Thirty-two alumni riders actually participated in the interviews (6.7% of all alumni)—ranging from three months to ten years removed from their experience (see Table 1). These participants range in age from 21 to 37 years old. They represented both graduate and undergraduate students from the following schools and colleges: engineering, liberal arts, communication, education, social work, natural sciences, fine arts, and business (eight of the twelve schools/colleges at the university). Fourteen of the participants continued their schooling beyond their original University of Texas education, five of these continued on with their education at the University of Texas. Participants also represented a wide range of leadership positions, year in school (e.g. freshman, sophomore, etc.), ride years (i.e. the year they rode to Alaska), and routes (see Table 2).

SETTING

Extraordinary experiences are marked by a sense of newness and interpersonal interaction, triggered by unusual events, characterized by high levels of emotional intensity and

experience (Arnould & Price, 1993). Participating in Texas 4000 provides such an experience. Many participants have little to no experience cycling or fundraising, and many decide to partake due to a personal connection to cancer that affected them—an unusual event in one’s life. Interpersonal interaction is prevalent throughout participation: soliciting friends and family, interacting with community members, and building relationships with friends. The challenges and stories shared along the ride also provided for intense emotional moments. Texas 4000 was selected due to its likelihood of providing participants with an extraordinary experience, and based on the results of the study, it is evident that Texas 4000 does indeed provide participants with an extraordinary experience.

PROCEDURES

Participants were recruited via e-mail (see Appendix A). Upon agreement to participate, interviews were set up with participants—in person when possible, or via Skype or phone if alumni live outside the Austin, TX metropolitan area. Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with informed consent (included in the recruitment e-mail, see Appendix A), and asked to complete a background information form (Appendix B), via e-mail (sent with an e-mail reminding participants of the upcoming interview). Also, before each interview, a verbal consent for participation was sought (so it was on record), the information described in the recruitment e-mail, and a disclaimer that this interview was conducted independently of the Texas 4000 organization (i.e. there is no affiliation between the researcher and the organization) and was not meant to be an endorsement of, fundraiser for, solicitation of support for the organization.

Interviews lasted approximately one to one and half hours, and were conducted in a semi-structured format to allow for follow-up probes, or questions, to ensure that the fundamental characteristics of the experience have been described; the questions moved from broad interview

questions as guides for the conversation to more specific, focused questions as the conversation carried on (Munhall, 2010). Questions were included to examine the participant's experience in the program and how it impacted their life, especially regarding characteristics of extraordinary experiences and personal transformations. The semi-structured questions were altered after twelve interviews to be less guiding and reflect recurring information gathered during these twelve participant interviews. However, the essence of the interview guide remained the same—to examine the participant's experience in the program and how it impacted their life.

All interviews were audio-recorded, and field notes were taken on each interview guide. Field notes were taken to help the researcher mark items to follow up on, physical descriptions of items participants described (such as descriptions of locations, etc.), and any unusual occurrences during the interview. As the interviews were conducted over several months, interviews and field notes were transcribed during and following the data collection process. However, interviews and field notes were not coded and analyzed until all data had been collected.

INSTRUMENTATION

A semi-structured interview guide was created to ensure that relevant questions about their experience with Texas 4000, their relationships with their teammates, their previous experiences as it relates to their participation in Texas 4000, and the impact of participation on their lives were covered (please see Appendix C for the original guide and Appendix D for the edited guide). The questions were derived from work on transcendent customer experiences, extraordinary experiences, and personal transformation (cf. Lundberg et al., 2011; Schouten et al., 2007). All questions were reviewed for face validity by a panel of sport management and qualitative research experts. The semi-structured interview format allowed for follow-up

questions that encourage participants to expand upon their answers and provide thick descriptions (Munhall, 2010).

ANALYSIS

Interviews were transcribed and entered into Dedoose, which will be used to manage the data collected. The interviews were transcribed using a denaturalized approach (Oliver, Serovich & Mason, 2005). This approach is concerned with what is said during the conversation, the details provided, and meaning of what is said, and little to do with involuntary vocalizations and utterances that may be a part of the conversation (Oliver, Serovich & Mason, 2005). This approach allowed for focus on what is said and its meanings, which in turn will provide the information needed to provide a description of the experience and impacts. All transcriptions were typed and then entered into Dedoose.

Upon completion of all interviews, and transcription of each interview, the coding of the data began. The first round of coding was conducted line by line, and codes were generated from participant's words in order to best represent the data in its own terms (Sandelowski, 2000). In vivo codes were used in order to ensure that codes were participant-inspired and true to the participant's words (Saldaña, 2009). After the first round of coding, a second round of analysis was conducted to categorize the data. The second round of coding consisted of pattern coding in which the descriptive codes will be grouped into a smaller number of constructs based on their commonality and relation to the literature (Saldaña, 2009). Both questions were analyzed using this process, albeit with different pattern codes derived from the appropriate literature. The goal was to summarize the informational content of the data, as the data was produced from

conversations about participant experiences and characteristics relevant to extraordinary experiences and personal transformations.

Findings are presented in the next section. They were derived from the data collected, codes used to summarize the data, and pattern codes utilized to group the original descriptive codes. They are presented in the following order, using summarization of findings along with quotes from the transcripts to demonstrate the characteristic or perceived impact: description and discussion of the experience and its characteristics and description and discussion of perceived impacts.

Chapter Four: Participant History and Background

In this chapter, the participants' backgrounds and histories will be examined, as this information has an impact on the experience, as well as provides an understanding of the impacts (if any) on individuals. Participation in Texas 4000 encompassed from as little as nine months to as much as two years of individual's lives, as the requirements for participation and structure of the organization changed over time. Participants seemed to be aware of these changes, including the application process, organizational leadership, time commitment, and corporate sponsorship. Carrie (2009 rider) commented, "My understanding is that it's changed a lot. When I joined it was...what I would consider to be a quick application." Others discussed the other changes they have noticed: Jenny (2010 rider) expressed, "Texas 4000 was in the middle of a leadership change. Mary had just come in as the executive director for my year, literally three month prior." Rick (2009 rider) said, "my brother's doing it next year, and he was recruited almost two years prior...whereas I had the freedom of putting my involvement on hold, he doesn't." And finally Emily (2004 rider) explained, "There wasn't a lot of corporate interest at the time, we didn't have an official sponsor."

Despite these changes, the participation experience followed relatively the same process for individuals: making the decision to join the organization, planning and preparation for the ride, the ride itself, and the transition back into everyday life. Each of these stages of the process contributed to the overall experience and the participants' perceived impacts, which will be discussed in the following chapters.

DISCOVERING TEXAS 4000

The decision to join the organization started with participants learning about the organization—most commonly through the media, signage, tabling, friends or someone else telling them about a participant. For example, local coverage of the ride on television or in the university paper was the original contact points for several individuals. Emily (2004 rider) said, “I read about it in The Daily Texan; they did an article interviewing Chris Condit [the founder of Texas 4000] about what he was going to do, and then they mentioned we’re going to have an information session.” Jenny (2010 rider) also said, “I saw an article about Texas 4000 in The Daily Texan . . . and I thought wow that’s crazy, what a cool organization. I can’t believe they’re doing this.” Carrie (2009 rider) saw coverage on a local television news broadcast. “They were broadcasting about the Atlas Ride . . . and immediately saw it and thought I want to apply.”

Signage and tabling on campus was also important in the discovery process for some. Flyers on bulletin boards or handed out at tabling events (events in which individuals currently in the organization set up a table in a well-traversed area on campus to recruit participants and spread awareness about the organization) did not inspire many participants to take immediate action, but did make them aware of the organization. “Someone passed me out a flyer while they were tabling one day, and I kind of dismissed it. I was like that’s weird, and why would anyone do that? . . . So I just put the flyer in my computer bag and went about my day and I didn’t even go to an info session,” said Rachel (2012 rider). Judy (2009 rider) echoed those sentiments. She said,

I actually had learned about them years before I even applied, when I was a freshman. I remember seeing a sign in the physics building, and at the time I didn’t realize what it

was attached to, why they were cycling. . . . And then I was working in the library, and on the university's homepage they had a little ticker that sort of was just talking about all these students cycling to Alaska. . . . I spent most of that summer reading their riders journal entries, and the more I read, I realized that I really wanted to be a part of it.

At least one individual, however, did take action upon seeing a flyer. June (2011 rider) went to an information session upon seeing a flyer:

I usually try to ignore [the obnoxious flyer people], but I was kind of at a point in my life where I . . . was feeling a little lost. . . . I saw the flyer 'Ride your bike to Alaska,' and I was like 'no, way, that's lies.' And then I read it, and it intrigued me enough to figure out when the next info session was, and I went to that and just got super-hyped.

Learning about the organization through chance happenings, such as media articles or flyers, was not the only point of contact. Several participants learned about the organization through friends or acquaintances—either who had heard about the organization or had participated previously. Robin (2009 rider) said, "I met [Sharon] in our freshman dorm, and she was one of my really close friends all through college . . . and then she told me that she saw this flyer on campus, and then that's how I heard about it." Similarly, Lauren (2007 rider) commented, "My freshman year I was on the women's novice rowing team, and one of the girls who was rowing as well was telling me she was going to the information session that night, and what it was about, and I just thought that it was really cool. So we went to the information session together." These riders found out about the organization through friends who had heard about the organization and wanted to learn more.

Others had connections to riders—mainly through their hometowns. “I found out about Texas 4000 through a guy in my hometown actually. . . . And I thought that was . . . a little odd and crazy. Why would someone ride their bike to Alaska?” said Carolyn (2012 rider). Arthur (2008 rider) said, “I found out about it my freshman year. There was a kid in my high school that actually did it. And so I followed him through the summer. And it seemed like a really cool thing.” Similarly, Diane (2009 rider) said:

I had heard about Texas 4000 when, when I was a freshman at UT and mom was recently diagnosed. And it was actually a student who graduated from my high school that was riding. So he sent out letters, you know, they did the letter writing campaign. And he asked for a donation and my mom actually wrote him a check, and we still have like a copy of it and everything.

Finally, at least one rider was a friend of riders from previous years. Anna’s (2013 rider) first interaction with Texas 4000 was through one of her best friends.

He was a freshman at the time when he got into the organization and I just remember every time we would hang out he would always be talking about it and it consumed his life and it was this amazing, amazing thing that he seemed to be a part of.

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPRESSIONS

Riders’ discovery of Texas 4000 sparked some sort of interest in joining the organization. Some knew more than others about the organization, though. “When you hear about it, it’s the longest annual charity bike ride in the world . . . and when you first hear about it, you kind of hone in on that Austin, Texas to Anchorage, Alaska,” said Jack (2012 rider). Jenny (2012 rider) commented:

The article I read in The Daily Texan was about them getting to Alaska, and so really all I knew about it, I think at the time was, it was an organization that biked from Texas to Alaska and raised money for cancer research. That's pretty much it; I didn't really understand any of the deeper stuff about the program or any of that.

Arthur (2008 rider) presented a different perspective. He said:

It was about a bunch of cool kids riding across the country and meeting a bunch of people along the way, stopping at different cities. Just getting to see the country from a different perspective and spreading hope, knowledge, and charity for Texas 4000.

The overarching impression, though, was that it was a student organization that raised money for cancer through riding bikes from Austin, Texas to Anchorage, Alaska. Differences in perception varied based on initial contact points. For example, those who discovered the organization through media and flyers presented a limited view of the organization. Knowing someone in the organization, however, presented a slightly more in-depth understanding of the organization, as Anna's (2013 rider) comments exemplify, "I learned that Texas 4000 was about people who had a passion to make a difference in the fight against cancer, and who were willing to give up, not only their time, but also their bodies in this fight."

REASONS TO JOIN TEXAS 4000

After learning about the organization, many participants knew they wanted to apply. Some thought it sounded like an adventure or challenge that was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Others felt that the chance to make a difference and address the problem of cancer was the most important reason to join. Finally, several riders were interested in meeting other people.

Interestingly, very few mentioned both a reason related to the cause and a reason related to the challenge or adventure.

Challenge and Adventure

Many participants had been directly affected by cancer—through immediate family members, friends, and acquaintances. There was at least one cancer survivor who participated, and one more rider was diagnosed while preparing for the ride. Not all riders had this direct connection to cancer. “There are a lot of people that do the ride that don’t have a connection to cancer. They just think that it’s a great thing and a great cause, so those people are very lucky that they don’t have a connection” (Rachel, 2012 rider). Calvin (2008 rider) confirmed Rachel’s conclusions:

Honestly, my life before the ride was not very affected by cancer. I mean, the dearest loss of mine was a dog. All the people I knew with cancer recovered. I mean I knew it was a problem for the world, but personally I was like, “No. You know, cancer sucks. Yeah. Whatever.”

These sentiments were echoed by Arthur (2008 rider) who said, “I didn’t really have any real affiliation with cancer either. Like I didn’t really know anyone directly affected by cancer,” and Jenny (2010 rider) who explained, “I had no relatable [experience], like no one in my family’s ever had cancer.” This didn’t stop riders from wanting to ride for the cause. “I didn’t really have a story,” said Michael (2006 rider). “It’s a really good cause whether its affected me or not, that doesn’t mean I can’t give a crap, just because it hasn’t affected me personally. I still understand that it affects a lot of people.” Riders without a direct connection to cancer found other reasons to ride, as well. Most prevalent was the desire for an adventure or a challenge.

Biking 4,500 miles to Alaska seemed like something different, incredible, and difficult to accomplish—regardless of one’s connection to cancer. “The concept was mind-blowing...I was really interested in getting more involved in cycling, and just to see if it was possible,” said Emily (2004 rider). Emily was a part of the first team, and did not have the luxury of knowing that previous teams had made it to Alaska and the journey could be completed.

The challenge did not diminish in later years, however, as completing 4,500 miles on the bike and seeing the country still was seen as an adventure. “The main reason I joined it was because I was starting to get hooked on this idea of long distances. And I thought this would be the ultimate challenge. So that was my main reason, to challenge myself,” said Michael (2006 rider). Francie (2010 rider) explained, “I hadn’t really been involved in anything that extreme or had any, or would have had any experience like that otherwise. So I decided to do it for that reason.” Joseph (2010 rider) was a cancer survivor and had participated in previous fundraisers. He explained:

[I applied] because I wanted to ride a bike to Alaska. I had done other cancer fundraisers in the past—so not that I felt that I was above fundraising, but that was not the primary reason. I did it, I paid my dues, I think I can do this fun. . . . I really just wanted to do the bike ride.

Francie’s grandfather had been treated at MD Anderson (one of the beneficiary’s of Texas 4000’s fundraising efforts) and Joseph’s life had clearly been impacted by cancer, but Michael and the following riders had very little connection to cancer. Will (2006 rider) said:

For me it was just a huge adventure . . . it just kind of clicked that I could get involved in a new team effort and have this big adventure. And for me, the mission of Texas 4000

and the focus on cancer, early detection, and prevention came secondary to wanting to have a big adventure.

Sentiments that Rick (2009 rider) echoed in his interview:

For me I was like well I didn't really know this was about cancer and I kind of just joined because I wanted an adventure. . . . The frank answer is that I wanted an adventure. I spent all four years of my time at Texas on the university rowing team. And so I applied because my buddies and I were looking for another adventure. . . . And I knew that that would be my last summer before you know, I would work. So I kind of wanted to go out with a bang.

For Carrie (2009 rider) however, the adventure was secondary to the connection to cancer in terms of reasons to join.

A lot of it was what they were doing for cancer. And I think some of it, too, was adventure. I have what I consider to be a really adventurous spirit. I'm not an impulsive personality. But I do like challenges, and challenging myself, and finding out more about myself through this spirit of adventure.

Her response highlights the connection between the challenge and adventure that was shared by many of her teammates.

Cancer

For those who did have a more direct connection to cancer, they wanted to join to make a difference in the fight against cancer, do something about the problem, or honor friends and family. For some, it was the sole driver in applying and joining Texas 4000. Rachel (2012 rider) expressed:

I probably wouldn't have done a bike ride across the country or the continent if it wasn't like for a good cause, and so the fact that it was raising money for cancer. I've had a lot of cancers in my family—my grandfather and one of my uncles passed away from cancer.

Family members and friends with cancer were prevalent among the conversations. Participants mentioned that they wanted to do something about those who passed away.

My grandfather had cancer . . . and, so over time you see the, how he got older and he could do less and less. But when he got cancer that just accelerated. . . . I really noticed that he wanted to be out there, but he couldn't be. And that really hit at me...and after time had passed like I really wanted to do something about it. Because that's when he just wasn't ok. That's really why I joined. (Eric, 2013 rider)

The reason that I decided to do [Texas 4000] was that my mom was a cancer survivor. She was diagnosed with cancer two weeks into my freshmen year of college...It's something that makes you feel helpless and when you do get the opportunity to [do] something to help address the problem and I felt like that was the biggest thing that I could do, was to ride my bicycle so that can generate money for cancer and help people who have that. (Renee, 2007 rider)

For some, the ride was a way that they felt like they could help address the cancer problem, when other options were not available.

My grandfather . . . was diagnosed and within eight months he passed away. And at the time I've always been like super problem solver type of person and so at the time

whenever I was in sixth grade, I was like “I’m going to become a research scientist, I’m going to find a cure for cancer. So, this story doesn’t happen again.” And so I decided that in high school, I had been doing everything in preparation for that; I took an internship with MD Anderson as a research assistant and did that for a year and quickly realized I did not like it all, and it was not for me in any capacity, even though that was something I was really passionate about. Around that same time my Mom was diagnosed with cancer. . . . So it was kind of this ever-present thing in my life. So, I come to UT with kind of with the understanding that I was going into exercise science but I want to be pre med, still kind of thinking that I want to do something in medicine, but take a step away from research, maybe just deal with people. And then that’s when I found out about Texas 4000, and what they do, and I was just swept up in the idea of all of it because it’s kind of attacking cancer from all angles—like reaching out to people, promoting awareness, raising funds, and so I was just totally captivated by it. And that’s why I joined. (Lauren, 2011 rider)

Growing up, my brother had a friend that they’d known since pre-K and we went to church with them, and her mother had cancer twice, once, the second time she had it, we, we came to know this family. And I learned that several women in her family had cancer—breast cancer particularly. So, obviously there was probably more of a genetic link there, and, it dawned on me that this young lady that was my brother’s friend, probably was at a greater risk because of so many women in her family having this and several of them passing away from cancer from a late diagnoses. And so that really

pushed me. I was like, “Okay, this is someone that I know personally that could be affected in the long run.” And so that just sold it for me, that I wanted to find out more how we could help. I knew that I was never going to be a researcher that was not my calling. And so I just felt that this was a different way for me to make a difference. (Judy, 2009 rider)

Others thought that participating in Texas 4000 would be a good way to support and honor those who had been diagnosed with cancer. For them, the focus on cancer added meaning to the ride.

Sure when my very close friend . . . was diagnosed with brain cancer and she had a brain tumor and when she was diagnosed it kind of hit home at that point. . . . And I want[ed] to be able to support her in way possible and I thought that doing Texas 4000 was a way of showing her my support. (Olivia, 2010 rider)

When I discovered that it was about cancer and fundraiser for cancer research, it kind of gave a meaning to it all. In my family, we’ve lost many people to cancer, and so I’ve always done races before like running races to honor them. . . . I thought [Texas 4000] would be a good opportunity to help the cancer community by fundraising and also by honoring all [my family] members and friends who’ve had a cancer. (Marcus, 2012 rider)

Meeting Others

Others joined wanting to meet people similar to them. Carrie (2009 rider) had just moved to town, and explained:

I thought actually it would be a really great way to meet people...meet like-minded people as well. I have to admit I was kind of nervous as well. I was a graduate student at that time and so I think I was a little nervous that I would be joining this group full of undergraduate students. And even though our mindsets and purposes for being there would be really similar I didn't know how it would turn out.

Diane (2009 rider) who had lost her mother said one reason why she joined the organization was "meeting girls that had very similar backgrounds as me, then especially meeting Susan who is my friend who had lost her father." Judy (2009 rider) took a broader approach when explaining that she wanted to meet people. She said, "I think that the prospects of getting to see the US and meet people and learn their stories, really also motivated me. I'm definitely someone that's driven by working with people and listening to others."

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

The application process began once participants decided they wanted to join the organization. Although it has changed some over the life of the organization, the process has generally involved submitting a written application and completing an interview with past riders, who often saw their role as one of protecting the mission of the organization. "You're not going to get into the organization if you're not there for the right reasons. So if you're just like a sports junkie looking for a really awesome experience to go touring through the country, that's going to come out in the interview. You're not going to make the team," explained Jack (2012 rider). Eric (2013 rider) expressed:

You just see a wide range of people and you have to decide who makes it or who doesn't, and everyone who applies wants to be there, but you have to say who's the most qualified

and who will help out the best because there's only so many spots that we can fill...and in some ways its tough to make that decision.

Similar to leadership, organization, and routes, the application process has become more formal over time. In the early years, there were less applicants and the process was less strenuous. Will (2006 rider) believed:

My year it was not a competitive application cycle. . . . Almost as many people applied as got accepted, which was very unique for Texas 4000. Now, there's a wait list, you participate for a year and half or so. One in three applicants or so gets accepted. My year they kind of accepted just about everyone who applied is my understanding.

These riders are well aware that the process has changed. "I was only in 2006, now I hear its actually very arduous. We had to fill out a written application and then we had an in-person interview, but they were all pretty painless I thought," expressed Michael (2006 rider). The commitment of participants to the cause was also less important at this time, as the organization needed participants. As will be examined later, many participants felt that some riders were riding mostly for the adventure and not the cause—something reflected in the reasons given to join the organization. Calvin (2007 rider) stated that regarding the applicant selection,

The year that I did it was pretty lackadaisical still. It was like, 'Hey. We just need this approved that you understand how much effort it's going to be in terms of planning before you go and that you're like in some kind of a moderately-fit shape so that it's possible for you to do this bike ride.

There were participants from early years who discussed feelings of nervousness, but the majority of participants who felt nervous were from 2009 or later.

The written application was the first step for all participants, for some it provided an opportunity to reflect, for others it was a source of anxiety. The application contained “mostly essays about why you want to join, what do you think you can bring to the organization, what is your time commitment like, do you feel like you could raise the money...you could do all the training” explained Thomas (2009 rider). The question asking why participants wanted to join offered the most opportunity for reflection. Many participants wrote about their personal experience with cancer. For example, Diane (2009 rider) stated, “I wrote my essay about my experience with my mother,” who had passed away from cancer. Others offered the following explanations:

I'd never really, I don't want to say dealt with my mom's death, but I never, it was something that I tried not to think about for a large part. And when something that happens when you're twelve you don't really. . . . I'm going to shuffle this under the rug and so it asked a lot about that and what inspired you to do this? So it really made me sit down and like think about it, and put it into words, frame that. Which, so that part of it I think was interesting, good for me, by itself. (Thomas, 2009 rider)

I think it was definitely a very reflective process to speaking out like what the real reasons are, if this was more out of like selfish transition or it's just something like I really want to do. . . . And so I really got to think about that and then I was probably even more fired up after going through the process. (Olivia, 2010 rider)

For Anna (2013 rider), who also reflected on her mother's battle with cancer, the written application process made her anxious. She relied upon her friends who had ridden previously for advice, and revealed,

When I was writing my application, I was really, really nervous. I don't think I've ever been that nervous submitting an application before, in my life. And then right after submitting my application, actually I began thinking like well, maybe, maybe I need to do something else. Maybe I, maybe like that wasn't what I'm supposed to do. And I think, I was sort of preparing myself to not be accepted into the organization. I thought about withdrawing.

For others, their nerves were more prevalent during the interview process. Not all who submit written applications are selected for interviews, but the interviews generally consisted of three to five people, including board members and past riders. Judy (2009 rider) revealed "I just remember like being very nervous going in, and walking out like feeling relieved. I was like 'Ok, I did my interview.'" Diane (2009 rider) expressed her interview experience in the following statement:

And it was very intimidating, because there was three of them and one of you. And it was over in the engineering building. And I remember they were asking questions like- What would you do in an emergency situation? And I was like "I don't know, I guess the best tactic is stay together." I really didn't know, call 911 obviously first, but it didn't come to me. And I remember them when they asked me to talk about the personal level, I got emotional, it was like still fairly recent, so it was even hard to talk about my personal experience. I thought I bombed that interview, bombed it, right. Afterwards it's funny,

because it was one of the alumni who interviewed me said we could tell you were so nervous.

Jenny (2010 rider) described the experience as “horrible.” She said:

When I got called for an interview I couldn't believe I was getting interviewed cause I really thought there was no way that they would pick me. But then I got called for an interview, and I signed up for the first, the second slot (because somebody had already signed up for the first one). Because I thought I just need to get this over with cause I really thought it was going to be horrible. . . . I had never had an in person interview, I don't guess, that I can think of except for, for high school jobs, which were stupid. So yea, so it was like my first real interview and I totally thought I had bombed it. I was just like, “Oh my god that was a horrible experience. I just, I'm so glad its over with.”

For others, anxiety came from having to tell family members about applying or being able to go on the ride.

I guess I was nervous about it, well, first of all, my mom was not a fan of the idea, so I don't know when I actually told her, maybe it was after I got accepted or something, but it took a little convincing of her to let me go. So that gave me some apprehension.
(Arthur, 2008 rider)

I actually didn't tell my friends that I was applying. I didn't tell my Dad because I was nervous about what they would think. Like I know I thought that's not something college students could do, and I definitely was overweight cause I was doing the stress eating and everything after Mom had passed. And I thought, I don't even know that I had the

confidence in me. But I thought I'm going to hate myself if I don't try. (Diane, 2009 rider)

EXPECTATIONS OF THE EXPERIENCE

Learning about the organization, deciding to join, and going through the application process all led to varying expectations about what the experience would be like. Many expressed that they did not know what to expect. "I had no idea what I was getting into. I think a lot of people have that experience," Jenny (2010 rider) expressed. This sentiment was echoed by Thomas (2009 rider) who said, "I didn't really have any [expectations]. . . . I had no idea what to expect," and Joseph (2010 rider) who said, "I tried not to expect much because I didn't know what to expect." Anthony (2009 rider) said that he didn't really have any expectations "cause how do you have an expectation for something like that?" Jenny (2010 rider) also gave a reason for her lack of expectations:

I don't think I'm a big expectations person. . . . I think generally having expectations just leads to disappointment. So I try not to have expectations...so I think with the ride my expectation was mostly just we're going to meet a lot of people and it's going to be fun.

Her general expectations about what would happen matched many others, who simply described the activities they expected to partake in—usually gleaned from flyers or what was said at information sessions. Calvin (2007 rider) said, "I didn't really have a lot of expectations. I was going to bike ride, I was going to meet some people, see the world."

I knew I'd be raising money. I knew I'd be having to talk to people about what I'm doing, and like soliciting donations from random people I don't even know. I knew I had to train for the bike ride. Arthur (2008 rider)

Will (2006 rider) said, “I was so focused on riding my bike to Alaska, I knew that there was going to be that component . . . do a lot of training and ride my bike to Alaska and raise some money along the way.”

My biggest expectation was we’re going to help people. I’m going to be on a bike a lot. I think I thought we were going to be doing some more volunteer work than my year did. . . . I didn’t really [know what to expect] aside from what they told us in the information sessions and in the interviews. (Judy, 2009 rider)

The other reoccurring theme regarding expectations was about meeting new people. “I think I expected to meet new people,” said Carrie (2009 rider). Anna (2013 rider) explained, “I was incredibly excited . . . to meet all these other people who were going to change me and inspire me,” and Olivia (2010 rider) “expected to become really close to all my team members.” Diane (2009 rider) also “was really excited to meet other people that had been accepted,” but had some reservations because “I was a senior, and so I was really enjoying my last year with my friends that I had made in college.”

Additionally, people had developed expectations about their new teammates, based on the impressions they had formed about the organization. For example, Carrie (2009 rider) stated the following:

I expected honestly to meet a lot of overachievers. I think you don’t really commit to riding a bike to Alaska without being somewhat committed to the cause...I also expected just people of all different skill levels [regarding bike experience].

Michael (2006 rider) had a slightly different view on his new teammates and the organization, “I really thought this was going to be the most hard core thing with the most hard core people.”

The belief that their new teammates were overachievers led to feelings of inadequacy or not belonging by some.

I was terrified about what I was about to do. I had felt so unprepared and I didn't feel like I was the caliber person that really was a Texas 4000 rider. But I was, at the same time, so incredibly excited . . . to meet all these other people who were going to change me and inspire me. (Anna, 2013 rider)

Michael (2006 rider) echoed his earlier statement and added, "I pretty much thought it was a team full of badasses...that everyone was just some sort of hard core cyclist...[I thought that] 'I'm going to be the wink link.'" Thomas (2009 rider) also felt that, "I wasn't really at all in shape joining Texas 4000...and so I felt like I didn't belong, a little bit."

However, not everyone felt that they were going to hold their teammates back. Arthur (2008 rider) said, "I figured look at all these other people who've done it in the past. So the training part I wasn't as nervous about." Generally, though, participants were excited to meet their teammates, and had a positive impression of them, despite some reservations about how they would individually fit into the team.

Another common expectation was that participation would be very time consuming. For Olivia (2010 rider), this was cause for concern, "I was stressed because I knew that it meant I had to give up a lot because I was involved in a lot of things in school. I knew that I had to step down from some other activities." Diane's (2009 rider) involvement was limited due to being a senior and wanting to enjoy time with her friends outside the organization. She commented that because of that "I didn't get super involved in the organization until the spring semester." Anna's (2013 rider) friends in the organization had given her a clear idea about what to expect regarding

dedication. “They talked about how going on rides, dedicating those Saturdays to an organization and giving up your Friday nights for this organization.”

Others talked more generally about what they expected to get out of the organization in terms of adventure and impact. “For me it was just a huge adventure,” said Will (2006 rider), something Rick (2009 rider) echoed “I mean it was [going to be] a grand adventure.” Some also felt that participation in this “adventure” would define them and change them. Anna (2013) commented, “I thought that going into Texas 4000 . . . I was going to be impacted by all these people and my whole entire outlook on life was going to change.” These expectations were culled by her relationship with previous team members. However, Rick (2009 rider) did not know any team members before joining, and so his expectations were that, “it was going to change me in basic, superficial ways. . . I was really going to focus how can I brag about this ride, is this something I can use to impress people?” Will (2006 rider) was expecting the ride to become a part of his identity, “It was something brand new to my life, and I felt like it was something that very much was going to help define who I was in some ways. I’m that guy that is riding his bike to Alaska.”

Despite the wide variety of expectations about their experience, very few had clear ideas of what to expect, and those who did had learned about the organization from others who had previously participated. When asked, many riders discussed what they didn’t expect from the experience, emphasizing the limited scope they had regarding the expectations. Things like camaraderie and a larger focus on the cause than originally thought were unexpected for some—information that may not have been emphasized in the media or flyers.

PARTICIPANT HISTORY

Many of these expectations were cultivated also by the previous experiences participants had had with both the cause and the sport. Participants ranged from avid cyclists to individuals who had not ridden a bike since elementary school, from endurance athletes to non-athletes, and from regular fundraisers to once-a-year participants in charity events.

Cycling Experience

Participants' ideas of what they considered a cyclist varied some, but generally they thought that cyclists were individuals who rode road bicycles (bicycles specially designed for competitive road cycling) and competed, not commuters or recreational cyclists. Rachel (2012 rider) commented that "I was not a cyclist, I had never been on a road bike before." Similarly, Abigail (2008 rider) provided this description:

Because when I think of cyclists I think of Lance Armstrong, like the Tour de France. But I would consider myself more of a commuter or like a recreational biker. I don't know if I would call myself a cyclist. Because when I think of cyclists I think of people in spandex, which was never really appealing to me before.

Their definition of who a cyclist was influenced their perception of relevant cycling experience. Several individuals felt they had very little cycling, or athletic, experience and had not been on a bike in many years. Emily (2004 rider) expressed that "I wasn't super athletic, I wasn't involved in any sports teams or anything like that and cycling seemed like, I guess easier than running. More fun than running." Arthur (2008 rider) expressed a similar sentiment, "I wasn't active. I wasn't athletic. I was a normal kid going to school, playing in the marching band

. . . the only other athletic thing I've done before that was like 5Ks." However, as stated previously, Arthur did not feel nervous about not having any experience.

For Francie (2010 rider), though, despite having athletic experience, she was still nervous about her lack of cycling experience. She explained:

The last time I remember riding a bike was in 5th grade. I was athletic, but I wouldn't say I had cycling experience, I knew what the pedals were from the wheels, but that's not something that I was good at. I don't know, I was really terrified actually because I found out you had to clip into the bike and that was pretty intimidating for me.

Others discussed their athletic experience and lack of cycling experience as well. Thomas (2009 rider) said that, "I would run like three or four miles a few times a week. That was it . . . I had never ridden a bike that had gears or handbrakes before Texas 4000." Carrie (2009 rider) liked being active, but still felt very nervous about learning to ride a road bike.

I had been on the rowing team all through my undergrad, and had run a couple of half marathons, and, races and everything else. And had hiked a lot. So I really liked being outside, I liked being active. But in terms of riding a bike, it was something I really had to learn. I had bikes growing up, but in terms of riding a road bike, it's a completely different experience, and, so I was very nervous about that.

Robin (2009 rider) felt a little more confident in joining the team. She explained:

The only prior experience I had is I run long distances, so I'd run half marathons and marathons at this point. I guess like the endurance aspect made me feel a little bit more confident in being able to actually complete the task. But, I had never cycled before. So that was something completely new that I had to learn.

Will (2006 rider) had some cycling background, but used the prospect of joining Texas 4000 as motivation to get a little more experience. He said:

Before Texas 4000, I had basically no cycling background. Well that's not true . . . I did very little commuting, in college. And grew up riding the bike around the neighborhood and stuff. The summer before I joined Texas 4000, I borrowed a friend's road bike and got out and did a handful of rides. So, specifically I probably did like a 25, a 50, and a hundred-mile ride. Maybe just those three or four rides total was my road biking experience prior to joining Texas 4000.

Others did more commuting and riding growing up, but still expressed a lack of endurance or road cycling.

So I grew up in Germany where it's really normal to ride a bike around everywhere; you actually in elementary school learned how to ride your bike in traffic. So I learned how to just ride a commuter bike and me and my family, we would go on casual bike rides on the weekends. So I always enjoyed bike rides, bike riding because I think it's just really fun and before I would just get around on a bike, and I have ridden everything from mountain bikes to commuter bikes to road bikes before then. But I never really had a long distance bike racing, anything like that. ...before I joined Texas 4000 my friend and I would often go on a social bike rides, and just bike around. (Abigail, 2008 rider)

I've always ridden my bike. Like elementary school, I rode my bike to school every day. Middle school, I rode the bus because it was two miles away on busy streets. And then in high school I rode my bike to school every day unless I had out of school tennis

afterwards. . . . So, I've always been on a bike, so I'm comfortable on a bike and I have good feel for it. I'd never ridden a road bike." (Jack, 2012 rider).

Others expressed having road and endurance cycling experience. Anthony (2009 rider) said that he did "Road biking . . . it was mainly sometimes on the weekends. . . . It wasn't a nice bike or anything it was just a cheap bike." His comment about his bike being "just a cheap bike" seems to suggest almost a downplaying of his experience and that he doesn't see himself as a cyclist. Carolyn (2012 rider) also seemed to downplay her experience:

I did have some cycling experience, never racing or anything like that, but very short triathlons. But, yeah I don't think I was ever in too much of a hurry, but I got my first road bike, in '08, that would have been two years before I applied. And rode around a little bit, I did a couple of MS 150's, I never felt like high mileage was a big deal, I just kind of felt like oh you just do it. I never rode it three days back to back, so there's not really a way to train for a 70-day ride where you're riding five, seven days back to back. (Carolyn, 2012 rider)

Finally, Anna (2013 rider) discussed her experience with and distaste for cycling:

My dad cycles on the weekends, and he would always—so whenever I was home for the summer he would invite me to go [riding] almost every day. He would tell me, "Hey, do you want to go on a bike ride?" And I would look at him and tell him, "Dad, I hate bikes, uh no, I'm not going to go on a bike ride with you." And, nonetheless he would ask me the next day, and I would say the same. And so really cycling to Alaska seemed like the most unappealing thing I could be doing ever because I thought biking was so boring and my experience with my bike back home let me know that it was really uncomfortable to

be biking for more than an hour, or actually more than thirty minutes, for me was uncomfortable. And, so I had the experience of having a father who's a cyclist, and, having a bicycle essentially, knowing how to ride a bike, but also hating it.

In general, participants felt apprehensive about joining a program that required so much cycling because they felt that they did not have the necessary cycling background. However, they still joined the organization with this knowledge, and the belief that they would learn the necessary skills to cycle 4,000 plus miles, however difficult that might be.

Volunteering and Fundraising

Previous volunteering and fundraising experience of participants—either related to the cancer cause or not—was much less varied than the cycling experience of participants. The majority of participants had minimal experience with both fundraising and volunteering, and some said that they had participated in events like Race for the Cure, MS 150 and THON which all required fundraising a minimum amount to participate in a physical activity.

Jenny (2010 rider) said that she actually had, “never done Race for the Cure or any of that stuff. I think I'm not like a lot of people who did Texas 4000 because I really had no relatable experience whatsoever prior to doing it.” She, however, was in the minority, as many felt they had experience, but as Arthur (2008 rider) said, “not anything to that scale. I mean like little fundraisers for like band or something, but car washes. Nothing to that scale at all.” Further expanding on these sentiments, Lauren (2011 rider) commented about her previous experience:

[It wasn't] anything of [Texas 4000's] magnitude, just I mean only in the fact that in Relay for Life you're raising funds, but pretty much all of the organizations that I was

involved with prior to this were just kind of sports based, just kind of leisurely, extra-curricular. It's not really like a mission, very directed, focused activities.

Others also talked about their cause-related sport event experience, such as participating in Relay for Life, a Livestrong Challenge or MS 150. "I had always been involved with Relay for Life, for the American Cancer Society, so I was interested in raising funds or fighting it. Any way I could help out on that front," said Carolyn (2012 rider). Marcus (2012 rider) explained, "I did the Livestrong Challenges in Austin. So, they don't do cancer research, but they support patients, the process of dealing with cancer and survivorship." Jack (2012) rider had also participated in the Livestrong Challenge, and said,

I never really fundraised that magnitude before—\$4500 minimum per rider. But I had done things like the Ride for the Roses when I was little, which is now the Livestrong Challenge. . . . It's Livestrong's big fundraiser to raise money for cancer. I did that when I was in kindergarten, first grade, second grade.

Finally, Carrie (2009 rider) had previously participated in a large, student-run fundraiser for cancer research. She had participated in THON, and explained,

At my undergraduate school, I went to Penn State and I did something called Penn State Dance Marathon, which is the largest student run philanthropy in the world. They fundraise money for pediatric cancer research at the Hershey Medical Center through the Four Diamonds Fund. . . . And so I had done that. That was where you had to stand without sleep for 46 hours, for a cancer-related cause.

Participants' volunteer experience was similar to their fundraising experience—most had minimal experience, with some individuals having a greater foundation. Jack (2012 rider) said,

“I mean I did a little bit of volunteering in high school,” and many others did not mention previous volunteering experience at all when asked if they had ever participated in something similar to Texas 4000. Judy (2009 rider) and Rachel (2012 rider), however, mentioned more extensive volunteer work.

When I first joined [Texas 4000] in fall 2007, I was finishing up my duties as the Education Advocacy Director for the Habitat for Humanities campus chapter, so I had a leadership role where my, my role was to do outreach and organize the volunteers to go do different events and teach others about what Habitat for Humanity was doing, and what they’re trying to do, and then I was involved in some other student organizations that were involved with health organizations. And I also volunteered at a free clinic in town translating and so I did have experience just sort of working with a lot of people and doing volunteer and outreach work. (Judy, 2009 rider)

I lived in Israel and it was like a volunteer based program. And so I think that was like my biggest resume booster when I applied for Texas 4000 because I had spent like a year volunteering and I did daily with the disabled at the Tel Aviv marina and then I also did work with this organization called Saint Patrols Heart where they bring kids in from third world countries and they do heart surgery on them pro bono and then they send them back healthy, and so I worked in the rehabilitation house, and so I love volunteering. I mean I think it’s the best way to dabble in like a lot of different things without having to commit to like that’s your job. (Rachel, 2012 rider)

Overall, participants showed a desire to help others and give back, but most had never done so on the large scale basis that they expected they would with Texas 4000. As with their expectations regarding cycling, though, they knew that they would have to fundraise, and in the later years of the organization, volunteer.

Previous experiences, though varied among participants, did impact individual expectations. While the general expectation was that each individual would have to fundraise and ride a bicycle, individuals' expectations of themselves varied based on their experience. In the case of teammate expectations, especially, lack of experience cycling or fundraising often made individual's feel that they wouldn't fit in—as was the case for Michael (2006 Rider) and Anna (2013 rider). Will (2006 rider) was expecting adventure and had only one summer of cycling experience, and made no mention of volunteering or fundraising experience when asked about his previous experience. So, for him, the opportunity to build skills and learn something new likely contributed to his expectation of adventure.

DISCUSSION OF PARTICIPANT HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

The expectations and reasons for joining are factors that shaped many participants' experiences. Previous experiences, expectations, and reasons for joining all influenced the experience in terms of how the participants adapted to being a member of the team, and whether the experience fulfilled those expectations and motivations. Two major themes of the conversations about participant backgrounds and events leading up to joining the organization revolved around cancer and adventure, similar to Wood, Snelgrove and Danylchuk's (2010) findings who found that participants in charity events could be segmented according to their

identity with the cause and/or sport. There was also a sense of anxiety around applying for and joining the organization.

Cancer, unsurprisingly, was a major reason to join for many participants and influenced the expectations that participants had of the organization. Many riders had personal connections to cancer as loved ones or they, themselves, were undergoing treatment, had survived cancer, or passed away. It caused many to want to be able to do something to fight for a cure, as they felt a need to personally do something about the problem. Texas 4000 was seen as a way to fulfill this need in a unique way, as individuals had expressed wanting to become doctors but realizing it wasn't for them, and that Texas 4000 was a way they could still contribute to the solution. This mirrors what Wade (1998) described as the antecedents of personal transformation—a disorienting dilemma that provides individuals with a chance to reflect and expand their consciousness. In this case, a personal experience with cancer gave individuals a chance to reflect on how it impacted their lives and realize that they didn't want others to have to go through similar experiences. These individuals then took the opportunity to participate in Texas 4000 as a way to address this realization.

Texas 4000 gave many riders a chance to honor loved ones and provided a feasible method of helping to be a part of the solution, despite having very little experience fundraising or volunteering for cancer research. This made it very hard for many to be specific about their impressions of the organization and what they expected from their experience. As with many extraordinary experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993), participants provided only vague descriptions of their expectations. Generally the expectation was to ride a bike to Alaska and to raise some money for cancer research—information that could be gleaned from fliers and

information sessions. Some said they didn't want to have expectations, but generally the expectations were based upon what they had learned about the organization in their pre-participation search for information. As such, it was hard for riders to understand the complexity of the experience and what they might take away from being a part of an extraordinary experience. For those who joined to help cure cancer, their expectation focused more on the fundraising component, and this was what they were most excited about.

Those who joined to help the cancer cause were not concerned about their perceived lack of fundraising experience, however, many expressed anxiety over not having any cycling experience. Riders discussed how they did not understand much beyond general knowledge of bicycle parts or what cyclists look like, and consequently didn't have clear expectations about what their cycling experience would be. Even those with a little cycling experience seemed apologetic as they described having been on a bike, but not a "road bike," or their bike was a "cheap bike." This suggests that these participants didn't feel like they would belong in an organization in which cycling was a key component; that they were not true cyclists. Their lack of experience left them unprepared to fully understand the journey they were about to embark on, but also indicates that a sense of newness would be present throughout participation as they learned about how to cycle across the country.

Lack of previous experience with regards to cycling and fear of not belonging also suggests that some participants likely would not have participated in a cycling event had there not been a cause attached to it. The addition of the cause fulfilled other needs that participants had, but also added meaning and purpose to the event. The purpose of participating was to spread "hope, knowledge, and charity" to the larger community—it was not just a bike ride, it

had a purpose. This finding is not unique as Filo, Funk, and O'Brien (2009) discussed the importance of the symbolic meaning of charity sport events to participants that allows individuals to "express themselves and their alignment with a cause in which they believe" (pg. 377).

In brief, those who had a connection to cancer and used this connection as a reason to join focused mostly on the ability of the ride to fulfill their needs. Hence, they were unable to articulate their expectations regarding other aspects of the ride and seemingly apologized for a lack of cycling experience—something not required by the organization.

A desire and expectation for adventure was also prevalent among the conversations. The concept of riding 4,500 miles across the country on a bicycle was seen as a challenge and adventure by everyone. However, for those who did not have a direct connection, the chance for adventure was something they couldn't pass up. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity, but also it was chance to do something they hadn't done before. In describing wanting to have a big adventure, participants talked about "a new team effort" and "looking for another adventure," suggesting that there was a sense of newness in this endeavor they were about to take part in. Indeed, most had limited experience cycling, and for those who cited adventure as the main reason for joining, even less fundraising experience.

For those focused on the adventure, there was little connection to cancer. Despite this lack of direct cancer experience, these participants still understood that it was a good cause and knew that it was an important component of the organization. However, they tended to focus on the bicycling component, and thus had vague and varied expectations about the experience. Some thought they would do more volunteer work, while others thought that they would simply

be raising some money, but doing a lot of training. Participants' sense of adventure was unrelated to the fundraising or cancer component of the organization and was tied into the cycling component. This focus on adventure and cycling suggests that participants invested little in the cancer component of the organization and were not expecting it to affect them. Their lack of experience with the cause did not adequately prepare them to understand that component.

Participants were also unclear about what specifically they thought would be adventurous. However, the sense of adventure could derive from the sense of newness for participants had limited experience with cycling or had never been to places on the route, and from the challenge and separation from everyday life—all things mentioned in conjunction with desiring an adventure. Despite desiring adventure, most participants did not articulate expecting an adventure. Those who did were, again, not very clear as to what that expectation entailed.

Surprisingly, only one person said they had friends in the organization previously. Most people had little to no direct connection to the organization, several even mentioned that as a reason to join the organization; they wanted to meet new people or people with similar experiences to them. Some did apply with friends, but these individuals were in the minority. Instead, for the majority of participants the motivation to help out with the cause and be a part of something larger than themselves (and for some of those the motivation to meet others with immediate connections to cancer) was more powerful than participants' anxiety about stepping outside of their existing networks and communities. The lack of previous experience and connections to other team members highlights the strength of the motivation to contribute to finding a cure for cancer and to have an adventure.

Finally, the anxiety of applying, worries about fitting in, and nervousness about learning and doing new things serve to highlight the strength of the desire of participants. If participants did not place a high level of importance on being accepted, they likely would not have expressed how anxious they were throughout the process. Upon being accepted, participants also expressed how nervous they were about having to learn to bike and worried they were about fitting in with their new teammates, who they expected to be “overachievers” or “badasses.” Applying was rarely done on a whim, and participants invested a lot in the process because this was an opportunity they felt strongly about.

At this point, participants had not yet participated in any official Texas 4000 activities as a member. But their previous experiences, knowledge of the organization, reasons for joining, and expectations of the organization all influenced their experience. The ability of the experience to fulfill their needs and meet their expectations influenced their satisfaction with the organization. Participants who were looking to contribute to the cancer cure were able to overcome anxiety about lacking cycling experience or not knowing anyone in the organization. Those looking for an adventure were excited about the possibility to see and do new things—especially in relation to cycling. These two main motivations were thus captured the participants’ focus throughout the preparation for the ride and the actual ride.

Chapter Five: The Experience

Once accepted, there was a time gap of a few weeks to a few months before participation in Texas 4000 began. Initially, participation in Texas 4000 consisted of preparing for the ride and working to meet all of the requirements to be eligible to ride. This period of preparation lasted anywhere from seven months to a year and a half, and generally consisted of attending meetings, planning for the ride, training and volunteering as a group, as well as individually training and fundraising. If all requirements had been met, riders participated in the Atlas Ride, which marked the official beginning of the seventy-day trek from Austin, Texas to Anchorage, Alaska. Riders then broke up into two (or three in 2013) routes and began to spread “hope, knowledge, and charity” throughout the United States. All routes met back up in Canada and then continued riding as one team into Alaska. The results of this section will be broken up into two sections: the preparation for the ride and the ride itself.

PREPARING TO RIDE

“First, there was a picnic thing that the old team hosted for the new team. That’s where you get to meet each other and everything,” said Arthur (2008 rider). Upon acceptance, the first Texas 4000 event for most individuals was the new rider picnic. Often held in a park, the picnic allows new team members to meet other new members, as well as current and previous team members.

I remember being so in awe of the alumni, I was just like tell me all about it, tell me your stories. . . . It was really great because you got to meet each other, you got to meet the alumni, you got to meet the executive director who eventually became our team mom and was there for everything we needed and our support system. (June, 2011 rider)

The new rider picnic usually took place within a few weeks of being accepted into the organization, but occurred anywhere from seven months to nineteen months before the ride occurred. Jenny (2010) rider recalled, “I remember enjoying it because I met a lot of different kinds of people and they were from all different majors. But everyone seemed like adventurous and really excited . . . I was excited to meet a lot of people.” This initial opportunity to meet older riders and new teammates marked the official entry into the organization and was followed by many chances to get to know teammates through weekly meetings, training, fundraising, and volunteering.

Weekly meetings are a staple of the organization that allow for planning, dissemination of information and interactions with teammates. Team meetings were (and are) held every Monday night, with leadership and committee meetings held weekly as well on various days. “They were long. . . . You had to clear your schedule on Monday nights. . . . That’s when all the committees would update you on what happened the prior week and what your goals are for the next week,” explained Rachel (2012 rider). Robin (2009 rider) added, “The meetings were organized basically kind of by like action steps. Like here’s what we need to get done by this date, and like who’s going to be on the committee to help get this done.” Each Monday meeting served to ensure that students were informed about upcoming requirements and activities, as well as rider achievements.

Meetings also served as a way to learn from others about the ride itself, cycling, and the cancer community. Arthur (2008 rider) explained, “There were people who, you know we had alumni present about different tips or different like what you should do in this situation or that situation. They had some guest speakers like doctors in the community come talk about cancer,

then I think a group from MD Anderson came to talk about cancer.” Will’s (2006 rider) commented, “we had speakers every once in a while. We’d have a speaker come in and talk about training, physical therapy, bike fit, bike maintenance, and then I remember as well, each of us taking turns sharing our personal stories.” These personal stories were shared at the beginning of every Monday meeting. As Anna (2013 rider) illustrated,

We started hearing some really incredible “Why I Ride’s,” because at every single Monday meeting, someone presents why they joined the organization. . . . Some people talk about really cool topical things, some people talk about the people that they’re riding for. Some people tell you about their ideas on life.

Will (2006 rider) recalled,

[It was] an eye opening experience, as some of the, maybe quieter riders, or riders that had opened up about their experiences with cancer would come forward and, and share those experiences. . . . I distinctly remember a handful of those personal stories. And other riders’ decisions to get involved in Texas 4000 being very sad and very personal. And one that comes to mind is a rider, a very young rider, in fact, I think the youngest on our team, who had lost her sister to cancer. And it was one of those stories, that I had no idea her experience until she shared that with the full team.

The “Why I Ride’s” were one way of getting to know teammates. However, some believed “it wasn’t a lot of close bonding time or anything. It was more like you’re meeting with colleagues or something. Not like these are the people you can just spend every waking moment of your life with for 70 days” (Arthur, 2008 rider). This varied based on personality, though, as Will expressed, “I’m an extrovert, and I like being around people, and new people in particular, and

so the whole team building and camaraderie of meeting once a week, I always looked forward to getting in there and talking with people.”

The meetings were only a part of the time commitment for Texas 4000, and as Diane touched upon, participation in the organization could get expensive. The combination of the time commitment and the expenses caused stress for some riders, affected other parts of their lives, or limited their involvement in the organization. “I wasn’t really involved,” expressed Diane (2009 rider). “I was in the sorority and I was an officer in that. So I went to the Monday night meetings every week and I went to the Saturday morning workouts. . . . I just kind of did the minimal to get by.” Others who did minimal participation felt that they missed out:

I was just given the fact that I was pretty much working two part time jobs. I then had crew and then I had my classes, and I didn’t really participate in the community. I didn’t do any of the Saturday rides, I didn’t do any of the other scheduled rides. Any training I did, I did on my own. It was actually kind of bad. I’m rejoining the organization or joining the ride, and leaving and being like “I don’t know half the people I’m biking with.” . . . Some people were like we have no idea who you are. (Rick, 2009 rider)

Training, fundraising, volunteering, and attending meetings took up a significant amount of time each week for participants. Jenny (2010 rider) explained that as a leader she spent many hours each week in meetings or fulfilling her duties.

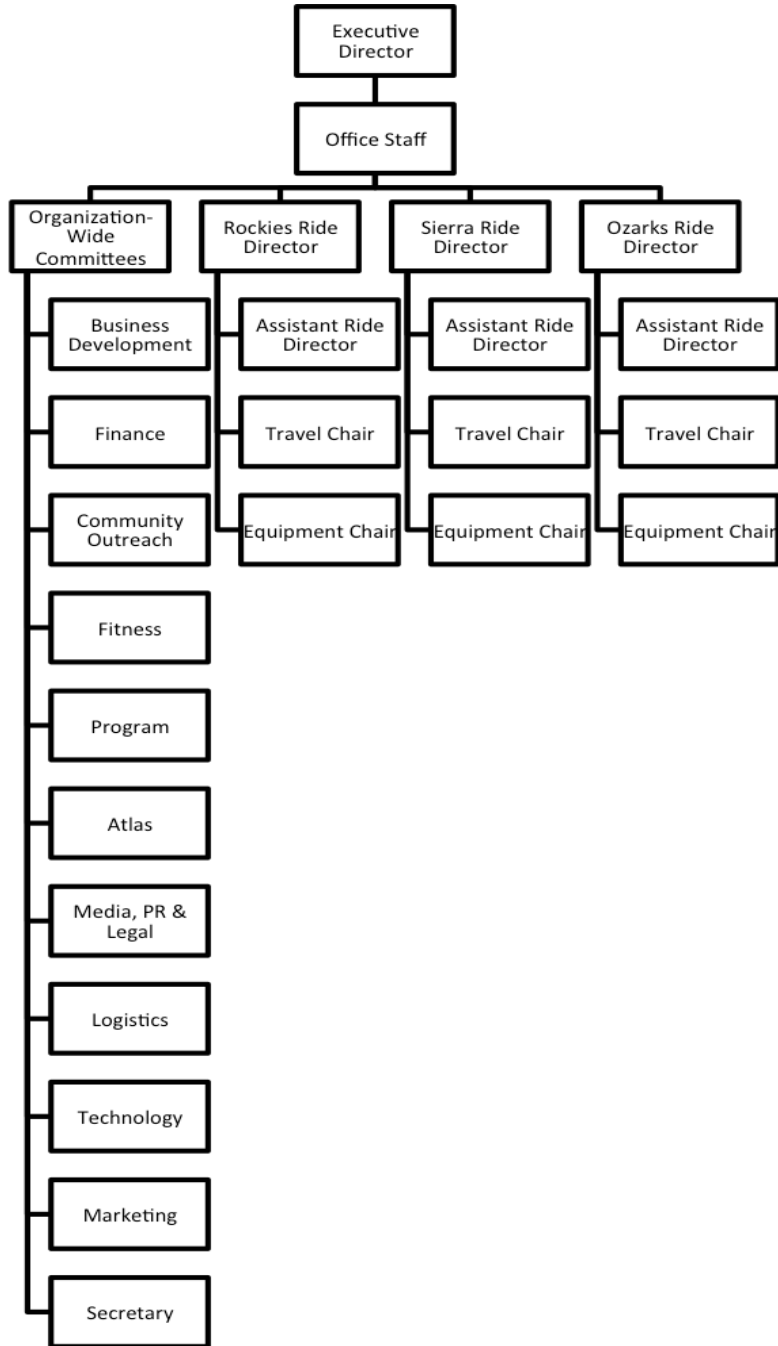
It was a huge time commitment, though. I spent two hours every Sunday, because it was always a two-hour meeting on Sundays, sometimes longer. And it was two or three hours on Monday, sometimes three. And then I was working outside, I mean, all the time on it. Like especially in the spring, and I did a lot outside of travel. So I was just always doing

stuff for Texas 4000. But travel was a lot of work . . . for me, especially near the end, it became like a full time job to do Texas 4000 for me.

Leadership and Organization

For those in leadership positions, the time commitment also included other duties and commitments. The organization is student-run, and as such, many students choose to take a leadership position or serve on a committee. There are ride directors, assistant ride directors to support them, travel chairs, and equipment chairs for each route. Organization-wide leadership positions changed over the years, but generally included business development, finance, community outreach, fitness, program, Atlas, media, legal, logistics, technology, marketing, and secretary (see Figure 5.1). Positions were usually supported by committees, and the names and responsibilities often changed from year-to-year as each team organized the ride logistics and planning in different ways.

Figure 5.1. Organizational Chart



Only one ride director participated in this study. For Sydney (2013 rider), being a ride director meant

Essentially I was responsible for making sure that everybody got from Austin to Anchorage, like alive and happy and safe. Pre-ride that is making sure that everybody is making their deadlines, so that's getting all their volunteer hours, that's riding their bikes, all of the miles they're supposed to ride and also fundraising their \$4,500 minimum. I also was leading team meetings for them, just kind of being the face of the team; you're supposed to be the person who knows everything about what's going on all the time. Organizing everything from just where the different committees are going to meet, to what's on the agenda for the committees to what the team needs to accomplish as a whole for that week, or that month, or that semester. On the ride it's much more day to day function . . . but essentially I thought my biggest job was making sure everybody was acting appropriately and being safe.

But being a ride director also affected participation in the organization, Sydney explained. "I became ride director and I started getting to know everybody better, but more on a working relationship. . . . It was hard to walk that line. I think I had an easier time doing it because I maintained more distance than other ride directors did." However, despite this distance Sydney enjoyed being a ride director, "My favorite part was being ride director for sure. Definitely one of the hardest things I've ever done, but I learned so much that I feel like I got a lot of real world skills as well as leadership skills from that experience."

The assistant ride director served to support the ride director, and it is worth mentioning that many ride directors and assistant ride directors felt that they had strong relationships

“because we were in leadership positions. . . . We spent more time together. . . . We talked every day and called each other every day before the ride” (Carolyn, 2012 rider).

The other large leadership role that students could take on was that of travel chair. “Before the ride starts we have all of our stops planned out. We have day by day, where we’re going to be each night, who we’re going to be staying with, and we have turn by turn directions for every single day,” said Jack (2012 rider), when asked to describe the travel committee’s responsibilities. The travel chair position was “about planning and about keeping track of the information well” (Jenny, 2010 rider and travel chair). The committee “had to make arrangements for lodging. And . . . in most cases you could just call up wherever we stayed last year and find a place” (Michael, 2006 rider). Delegation was key, as was working well with others—each committee member was delegated a number of days in which they had to contact hosts, and confirm day-to-day logistics with these hosts. Some hosts were new, based on route changes or feedback from previous years, while other hosts had been hosting since the very first ride.

Regardless, being travel chair or on the travel committee required a lot of communication with others, including the hosts. “I liked the idea of getting to know all the people that helped us along the route,” expressed Jenny (2010 rider). Abigail (2008 rider) explained,

I had to call around to all these different places. I really got to learn how to communicate in a more professional manner I think, and how to not take no for an answer and also how to just respond in a timely manner. I don’t think I had that kind of real life experience in college—they are kind of mentally preparing you for this is what the job field is like but I didn’t have hands on experience until [Texas 4000].

The final leadership position that was route-specific was that of equipment chair. This individual was responsible for gear orders and making sure that all riders had the appropriate cycling and camping gear to participate. “And then I was in charge of learning bicycle maintenance, and teaching that to my teammates. Those were my responsibilities,” explained Jack (2012 rider and route equipment chair).

Other organization wide leadership positions included business development, finance, community outreach, fitness, program, and Atlas. Throughout the years, though, the consistent committees and leadership positions were business development, finance, fitness, program, and Atlas ride.

Business development focused on securing sponsorships and donations for the team as a whole. Essentially, it is “a committee of people going around to businesses, asking for donations of things we need. So like, food, chamois butter, soap, chain grease. Random things that you don’t necessarily think about, but that are very necessary during the summer,” explained Jack (2012 rider). Diane (2009 rider) added, “We were supposed to find big sponsors for Texas 4000. Whether it be for the organization, whether it be for our food needs.” This committee, similar to the travel committee, required interaction with those outside the organization. Rachel (2008 rider) explained that this was the reason she chose to join the Business Development committee:

I would definitely consider myself a people person. Like I can probably talk to anyone about anything. . . . It was kind of like a process of elimination—the BD team, I can reach out to people I can kind of convince people to give us free food and like, sunscreen or whatever. So that’s kind of where I fell. I was really happy to be on it.

The finance chair and committee “was just in charge of collecting everybody’s donation money and processing it and making sure people are making their fundraising deadlines” (Jack, 2012 rider). Carolyn (2012 rider and finance chair) explained, “a lot of my job was related to encouraging people to write their letters.” However, she chose to be the chair because she wanted to “have a greater role in the organization . . . [and] I like numbers, plain and simple . . . that was the one [position] where I felt like I could help out the most.” Unlike previously described positions, there was less interaction with people outside the organization. Similar to other positions though, there was a lot of organization involved, “the role was a lot of organizing, counting money, money for deposits, tracking every donation” (Carolyn).

The fitness committee was similar to the finance committee in that most of its duties did not require interaction with people outside the organization, and did require encouragement and communication with all members of Texas 4000. The fitness committee was “supposed to keep track of everyone’s training and make sure everyone was getting in good shape” (Michael, 2006 rider). In addition to checking in with riders regarding their training, the fitness committee led weekly workouts and created cycling routes. They also organized training camp(s), depending on the year, in which coaches were brought in to help riders learn how to cycle in a group and routes were organized to simulate the summer ride.

The program committee was in charge of designing and delivering a presentation to hosts and communities throughout the summer—to help fulfill the team mission of spreading hope, knowledge, and charity—as well as bringing in individuals and organizations to speak to the team. As Marcus (2012 rider) explained, the program committee’s responsibility “was to bring speakers to our meetings . . . just bringing people from the cancer community in Austin to talk to

us about what they do so we're all aware of what's going on . . . [and] to plan and schedule all program events throughout the summer.” This committee was able to reach out to many individuals and organizations outside Texas 4000, and had less interaction with Texas 4000 members than other committees—a point best illustrated by Marcus (2012 rider) who said, “I closely worked with the travel chair and the program director and the ride directors to make sure that we had the right amount of programs scheduled in cities when we biked.” Other than to recruit participants to help put on the program, there was very little need to involve every participant.

Finally, the other continuous committee was the Atlas Ride committee. The Atlas ride is the first day of the seventy-day ride in which friends, family, and the public are invited to help send off the team. “Atlas had a lot to do with getting, basically fundraising and getting businesses to donate stuff,” explained Michael (2006 rider). “I thought it was just going to be all about planning a route and setting up aid stations and the kind of stuff that sounded fun.” For Will (2006 rider), it “was a pretty, pretty amazing professional development” opportunity, as it allowed him to work with others in and out of the organization to secure sponsors and plan the logistics of the Atlas Ride.

Overall, being a leader involved a lot of planning, organization, and interacting in a professional manner with those outside of the organization. All chose to be in a leadership position. “I wanted to be in a leadership position because I liked being in leadership positions,” said Jenny (2010 rider). Carolyn (2012 rider) echoed those sentiments, “I wanted to be a finance chair because I wanted to have a greater role in the organization.” For some their leadership

position became a defining feature of their experience, and it influenced their relationships with others in the organization.

To me what really defined my, the preparation of Texas 4000 was coordinating the Atlas Ride . . . As we got into the spring, I felt more and more confident in my role as the Atlas ride director, and got to where I was really enjoying the challenge of coordinating the Atlas Ride. (Will, 2006 rider)

Being a leader also led to tensions—both among the leadership group and between the leadership group and general team members. For example, on one ride because many of the leaders were friends with each other, it led to “a central clique that included both the director and assistant director” (Michael, 2006 rider). Some decisions by this clique upset other riders; the decision to get a big sponsorship deal was controversial because

No one asked us [the team riders], and we even had a ‘no directors’ meeting and almost unanimously said no, approached the directors and they said ‘tough luck, its too much money, we have to say yes. And I was shocked, I hated that. (Michael, 2006 rider)

In other instances, tensions between leaders were present due to management decisions.

Because I was so autonomous with the way I ran travel, Jordan wasn’t really interested in what I was doing because he knew I was doing fine without him, so he never really looked at it, so he had no idea what was going on. So when we left on the ride I was the only person who knew everything. (Jenny, 2010 rider)

Will (2006 rider) mentioned that he was “intimidated by some of my peers in my work group. That had some abrasive personalities, and were letting me know that they’re just opinionated and strong willed,” which led to thoughts of dropping out of the leadership position.

Training

A large component of preparing for the ride was preparing physically. Participants described the training in two parts—before receiving their bikes from the organization and after receiving their bikes. Organized training sessions were mandatory, as were participation in training clinics and a three-day ride over spring break. Participants were also encouraged to train on their own, and before any participant could leave for Alaska they had to complete a “Century Test.” Throughout their descriptions of training, participants mentioned injuries and accidents, the nervousness and thrill of learning new skills, and the ability to spend time with their teammates. Again, as with most organized activities for Texas 4000, participation changed over time. In the early years there was less organization and oversight by the team, but as the team became more structured, the practices and requirements became more organized and rigid.

Before team members received their bikes, practices often consisted of activities other than biking. There were some organized workouts—usually on Saturday mornings—and an expectation that each individual was putting in additional time. In the very first year,

If you wanted to train, you borrowed a bike from somebody else, which I did, or people played ultimate Frisbee, they kind of trained by running and playing Ultimate Frisbee.

The crew guys trained by rowing crew, like we didn’t have bikes for people to go out and do these long epic rides on. (Emily, 2004 rider)

In later years, there was more structure to workouts. Diane (2009 rider) recalled workouts in the fall, and said, “We went on runs around Town Lake. . . . I remember that being difficult for me. . . . I remember feeling winded and like ‘Oh, man, how am I going to do this.’” These early workouts served as an opportunity to begin getting in shape and preparing for riding

bikes. The first few workouts were often difficult for those who did not consider themselves athletes.

So the first time we ran I was petrified. I was like this is going to be horrible. Because also I have no illusions about myself. I'm very tall and I'm very curvy—not built for running. . . . And so, going into it I was just like this is going to be horrible. But so they had organized Saturday morning runs where ran around Town Lake. The first time we did it, I had to stop three times in three miles and I was like, “this, no, not happening.”
(Jenny, 2010 rider)

She, however, took this opportunity to work out on her own and build up her endurance. Indeed, team members were encouraged to workout on their own or with teammates, which worked well for those with busy schedules.

I was either either in school or I was working and I didn't have time to work out with other people's schedule. . . . I was always alone, but I didn't mind I was just like “I gotta get some workouts in.” (Renee, 2007 rider)

Once riders received their bikes, the training focus switched to learning how to ride a bike, for some, and building up endurance. Bikes were donated to the organization, and participants often had to meet a set fundraising requirement before they received their bike. Also, in early years, participants received their bikes as little as four months before the ride, whereas in more recent years, participants received their bikes as early as eight months before their ride. Upon receiving their bikes, participants described clipping in for the first time as terrifying and difficult. Many had never clipped in to a bicycle before and had not ridden a bike in years. Robin (2009 rider) described her first ride:

They took us out to this thing called the Veloway . . . and it was our first time to ever try to clip in. and I fell so many times, and then my really good friend Diane fell so many times too. And it's really funny to think back on, but I just remember riding around thinking it was so tiring and so hard.

Anna (2013 rider) echoed Robin's statements about clipping in and the difficulties of riding.

Riding is the most difficult thing for me, in the world, because I'd never clipped in on a bicycle before, and so having those shoes that clip in, and I fell every single time that I got on the bike. It didn't matter if I'd just gone, if I had just fallen and gotten on the bike again, I'd probably fall the next time that we stopped. So I was terrified of stopping.

For many, the first time on their bikes was at a training camp or clinic. More experienced cyclists, alumni or coaches ran these clinics, "where you learn basic bike skills for newbies" (Jack, 2012). Arthur (2008 rider) further explained,

[Training camp was supposed] to teach you how to ride in a group for long rides. It was targeted towards beginners, which was pretty good because I think a lot of us were beginners. . . . And they taught the basics, pacelines and hand signals and clipping in and clipping out of pedals, and how to stretch afterwards, and what you should be eating, or carbo-loading and stuff like that. And staying hydrated and bonking, all the basic, how to be a cyclist type things.

All of this information and learning new skills proved to be difficult for some, though. Rachel (2012 rider) described her experience at training camp as a novice cyclist.

They put you into categories based on your ride level, and so we had four categories. Ride Level Four was the least experienced, and needed the most help. I couldn't even

keep up with Level Four. I had my own coach and my own alumni. It took me like an hour to go a half a mile. I didn't trust the bike and yeah, I was NOT a cyclist.

Anna (2013 rider) recalled her training camp as being very frustrating because of the difficulty of learning this new skill. She remembered,

Crying out of frustration because I fell and there was so much blood everywhere, but mostly I wasn't crying because I was hurt or because of the blood. It was about the fact that this damn bicycle wouldn't allow me to stay on it, and I felt so defeated, and I thought to myself, "how am I supposed to be riding this, this bike to Alaska."

Despite the frustrations of learning new skills, Abigail (2008 rider) observed that it was an excellent way to get to know her teammates.

That was really the first big engulfing experience where we were stuck with other teammates we were in a hotel with other people you don't really know anything about there, gear that you might not be comfortable in. . . . So I kind of think it was like start feeling each other out at that point.

Beyond learning these new skills at training camps, most enjoyed the bicycle training process. Some of those who hadn't ridden in awhile felt that learning how to ride a bike "was not all that hard to pick it back up . . . the training rides were good" (Anthony, 2009 rider). Thomas (2009 rider) added, "I liked the training aspect of it. I liked the fact that I was much more physically active than I really had ever been." Saturday morning training mileage started off small, and increased regularly. "We would start with twenty miles, I think that was the first one we did. And then it just sort of upped every week. Occasionally you did two weeks with the same mileage," explained Jenny (2010 rider). Rachel (2012 rider) recalled that "we were literally

doubling our mileage, I was so mad, I was terrible and I wasn't confident on the bike and I was like struggling so bad." Most did some training on their own "because I was worried . . . I was doing Saturday ride and a couple of short rides during the week" explained Jenny (2010 rider).

Despite the mileage increases, most enjoyed the training rides because they could explore Austin and spend time with teammates. Thomas (2009 rider) commented, "I started going on training rides, which was nice for me. I just got to see a lot of parts of Austin that I had never been to before." Anthony (2009 rider) explained, "We started having some training rides and stuff, and so that was like a lot of fun. You got to explore lots of parts of Austin that I had never really been to, in terms of biking, that I would never drive to." On member-organized rides, there was opportunity for more close relationships to develop. Robin (2009 rider) said,

There would be alumni that would host weekly rides. . . . They were pretty fun. And so my friend Diane and I really started our friendship because we both went to this one alumni's ride, her name was Abigail. . . . It was usually just the three of us, Diane, Abigail and I. And we would just laugh and Diane and I would always die on the hills that Abigail would take us up, but we had a lot of fun.

Not everyone enjoyed training though. At times it was hard to fit into one's schedule. Sydney (2013 rider) went into detail about why she felt that training was a time commitment and a difficult experience.

Honestly just training, I hate training in general for rides. . . . I had a really busy schedule. . . . So I wasn't riding my bike like two or three times a week like I should have been. . . . I was just doing it one time a week with my team, so I would take six days off and then I would ride 80 miles. So it's no wonder I hated riding my bike. . . . So it was just really

hard on my body and I felt bad and just didn't like it. . . . I just kind of resented the time commitment for the Saturday rides. And how it made my body feel essentially.

Her opinion, however, was in the minority, as most who were able to put in the time either enjoyed their time on the bike or did not express an opinion one way or another.

In addition to the weekly training rides and the initial training camp, riders were expected to participate in the spring break training ride. This ride is “a three day ride to simulate the summer, so you get to practice using your trailers and packing stuff up, and the logistics of having forty to seventy people out on the road,” explained Jack (2012 rider). Rachel (2012 rider) stated, “that was the first time that I had ridden that high mileage, and it was back to back, plus we camped in between and we stayed at a school, so it was really like the ride.”

Most participants felt that having only each other to interact with, on the bike and off, really sparked the development of relationships among team members. “I remember the spring training ride being the catalyst, because you're staying together. That was the first time that we were really on a bike for an extended period of time,” rationalized Diane (2009 rider). For Arthur's (2008 rider) team, “it was the first time where like the whole team kind of rode together. So, that was good bonding time.”

The last major requirement of training was completion of the “Century Test,” “a fitness test . . . [where you] ride 100 miles in less than 10 hours,” explained Rachel (2012 rider). Carrie (2009 rider) used this test as motivation to train because, “in talking to people that had done it beforehand . . . they were telling us that it was really important to make this ten-hour deadline during the hundred mile century test. And how important it was to keep training after that.” Rachel (2012 rider) described the emotions she and others felt around this important day.

I was so nervous, because if you don't make it you have to do it again until you can do it, and that's riding for ten hours and that's a long time. And so, our team made it, and I remember . . . the very last team, one of the girls on our team showed up . . . she rolled into the parking lot and she doesn't even make it to the building she just makes it into the parking lot and she puts her bike down and she just starts bawling, crying and we're like "Sara you made it, you're OK," and she's like, "there was so much traffic, I didn't think I was going to make it," and she was crying and we're all hugging her, we're like we made it, there was so much emotion, because once you did that you're good.

For Thomas (2009 rider), this event helped build confidence:

Everybody passed the century test. I don't think anybody had trouble with it my year. But that was good as a motivator beforehand, and it was a good thing to do. After you felt really confident and maybe this is something that I can do.

Participating in cycling is an inherently dangerous activity—especially on open roads. For many who did not have much background experience with cycling, overuse injuries occurred, but for others bicycle accidents and illnesses proved to be major setbacks. Calvin (2007 rider) described his setback as one of overuse while training for a marathon that resulted in surgery, and missed training camp and "was just distraught that I might not be [able to ride] my bike because I couldn't walk for week or so and . . . had surgery." Not being able to ride, and suffering these setbacks was hard for some of those who were injured. Will (2006 rider) said, "I felt knee pain as I was riding...it was the first time I felt knee pain associated with long distance cycling, which was very demoralizing. So the final couple months of preparation for the ride, I wasn't riding very much." Arthur (2008 rider) also had a knee injury and articulated,

I couldn't really ride that much. And I was really worried that I wouldn't be able to go. Because every time I rode my bike my knee would hurt. And I'd never dealt with like sports injuries or anything before that so I didn't really know what to do.

He saw a doctor, and had a cortisone shot, "that really dampened my spirits . . . but I did start the ride . . . cause I don't want to just not try . . . if my knee never got better then I would back out." Anna (2013 rider) had similar knee issues, "that really prevented me from doing a lot of rides." She did physical therapy, and "didn't get to go on as many Saturday rides as everybody else, and I actually had to talk to Luke about whether not I was going to be allowed to go on the summer ride." She was unable to fulfill the 1,500-mile requirement, but was finally cleared to start riding shortly before the seventy-day journey. However, she had to slowly build up her mileage, which made her unable to complete the century test or her miles requirement, and cast more doubt on her ability to ride to Alaska. However, like Arthur, she was determined to complete the ride:

I told [Luke] that my role was going to be to help the team in any way that I could, whether I could be on the bike or not. I would be talking to people, the media, I would be engaging with host families, and kind of help the team however, whatever I could give to them. And we decided that that was ok, that I was going to be ok with not necessarily being able to ride as much.

Anna was able to ride over the summer, but not as much as others due to her inability to train.

Abigail's (2008 rider) setback was not a chronic injury use, but from a bike accident. "I broke my elbow and I had hemorrhage so I had to have my brain surgery which I had to have my brain drained that I didn't have I was in the hospital for three days." Her accident was severe

enough that others doubted her ability to complete the ride and affected her donations. “A lot of people were already giving up on me, it made me want to do it more though I kind of struggled with it at first because I was in occupational therapy but it made just want to do it more.” She also internalized her stay in the hospital and it took on greater meaning in her Texas 4000 participation.

I realized that I was in the hospital for three days, I can't imagine what a cancer patient must be living in the hospital for who knows how long at a time. . . . I was seeing it as a metaphor for it. You should never give up on someone.

Injuries were a source of setback and uncertainty that riders faced. However, these riders found a way to adapt and learn the necessary skills, complete the requirements to the best of their abilities, bond with their teammates, and contribute to the team in any way possible.

Fundraising

Another requirement that had to be met before riders could participate in the ride to Alaska was a fundraising requirement. The minimum varied some, increasing from \$3,500 when Texas 4000 started to \$4,500 in 2013.

We did have guidelines . . . to keep us on track, so it's not like, “oh I'll just raise money later,” and then it's the day before the ride and you don't have it. They were really good about keeping us on track with our fund raising goal. (Rachel, 2012 rider)

Anthony (2009 rider) said, “I never fundraised that much before. That was a lot of money to fundraise.” A point which Carrie (2009 rider) elaborated on by saying, “\$4,500 seemed not insurmountable but just really, it's a lot of money, especially to a student.”

As with training, some participants found fundraising the required amount to be difficult and others easy. Most used multiple strategies to reach their goal. The most common, and fruitful, method to raise money was a letter writing campaign. Another popular method was panhandling on various street corners. Others got more creative and utilized social media, art shows, garage sales, and spaghetti dinners to raise their money. All forms of fundraising required interacting with others. Olivia (2010 rider) explained that being able to interact with others allowed her to enjoy fundraising.

I really love telling people about Texas 4000 and they feel like when doing this, “I’m able to donate to this cancer.” . . . I’m so excited to be able to talk to people and ask them to partner with me in that way because not everybody is going to go and do Texas 4000 but at least they’re able to support admission . . . it was exciting to see the amount of support and the love from people showed this through donating.

The letter writing campaign was a way for riders to reach out to others, share their story, and learn about other stories. Letters were sent to “parents’ friends and people who I had met from when I was working in Houston, just asking them for donations. My letter had a personal story about how cancer had affected me and just facts about the organization,” said Eric (2013 rider). Arthur (2008 rider) similarly stated, “The letter was talking about who I am, why I was riding, and what the group is raising money for cancer and all that.” And Emily (2004 rider) explained, “A lot of us got a pretty significant amount of money that way.”

The success of these campaigns often hinged on those in one’s network—those who had an extensive or wealthy network found it easier to raise their funds than those who felt they didn’t have such an extensive network. Arthur (2008 rider) explained, “The key is to finding

older people who are very interested in this cause. So, my friends parents, I would send them letters too.” Jenny (2010 rider) felt, “I didn’t have a very hard time because I wrote a lot of letters. My grandparents had, I mean despite not being very wealthy, I have a very extensive network.” Will (2006 rider) discovered through his letter writing campaign how big his network really was. “I did a big letter writing campaign. So I just set down with my mom and found I’ve got a really big extended family. . . . It was largely [through] letter writing campaigns that I got most of my funds.”

Rachel (2012 rider) was able to see how cancer affected others through her letter writing campaign. Most of her funds came from this campaign, including her “father’s business colleagues and they were all very generous.” In her packet she included personalized letters, self-addressed stamped envelopes, headshots, and page dedications. These page dedications allowed her to learn about who was donating to the organization:

I also printed out these little pages where people could write page dedications. So I said, “even if you can’t donate I would love to ride for your friends or family that have been affected by cancer.” So a lot people sent me those back with like a check back saying like ride for their sister or their brother, whoever it may be.

The page dedications allowed her to see how extensive cancer is—something that Lauren (2011 rider) also learned through her campaign:

One of my biggest donations came through a lady I hadn’t met yet, my sister’s a personal trainer, and it was client of my sister’s and my sister kind of told her about what it was and she was really interested so I sent her a letter, and she sent me I think close to \$1,000. So that’s something I love about Texas 4000, even once people kind of hear about what

you've committed to, cancer's something that's affected so many people . . . it's just kind of a common denominator.

Diane (2009 rider) received most of her funds from her parent's network—despite starting late. “All of a sudden I went from being a bad fundraiser to over \$10,000 and it kept getting better. . . . It was mostly because my parents are involved in philanthropy in Houston, kind of in the social scene.” She found through this network that “so many of them have been affected by cancer.” One of the highlights though was an unexpected donation that she was able to share with the team, and celebrate as a team.

I got a check from, for \$50,000, out of the blue, from a gentleman. . . . I had a letter and it said, “Courtney, proud of what you're doing.” And there was a \$50,000 check in there. . . . I called Chris Condit, and told him. And I think he was speechless and I think he was emotional, cause he couldn't even talk, and I was the same thing.

Being able to connect with others, and learn how to do so in a professional manner were two takeaways from the letter-writing campaign. It allowed participants to see just how extensive cancer was within their networks, and to feel like they were a part of something bigger than themselves.

Panhandling also allowed people to fundraise and see that cancer is a prevalent issue in society. It originated when a student from 2004 “was in Houston, and he panhandled, in Houston, and raised like \$500 in two hours,” explained Emily (2004 rider). Then, “He sent out this e-mail ‘dude, I raised...this much money in 2-3 hours worth of work. You know, this is how we need to do this.’” So, the team began “doing formal panhandling sessions.” Most people panhandled on street corners around Austin.

Panhandling at football games proved to be lucrative, as well. “It was cool, people were very generous, a lot of fun, especially during the tailgating part. People always kind of wanted to donate food,” said Abigail (2008 rider). One gentleman she met at a football game had an impact on her fundraising experience:

Actually one of the games that we fundraised at . . . this one guy came up and told me about his friend who had died from cancer recently. So he gave me his Livestrong bracelet and he asked, “Could you wear this?” So actually I put it on my bike . . . and I don’t remember exactly what he told me but even thinking about it I’m getting all teary-eyed. Thinking about it, it was just like there is so much good in people that you don’t see and I think sometimes friends are forgotten in that process and I think that a lot of times the family of cancer survivors are the most affected and I think really everyone in that person’s life is affected. But it was just really touching to hear that “I want you to do this. I have this bracelet and I want you take it with you, I really want to remember the person and celebrate this person’s life.”

Most people only panhandled to supplement their letter-writing campaign. “We’ll be out there in our jerseys with like signs saying ‘Honk if you hate cancer, Texas to Alaska, any money helps.’ So, I panhandled a little bit, but I raised the majority of my money by writing letters,” said Jack (2012 rider). Jenny’s (2010 rider) success in her letter-writing campaign allowed her to panhandle for others who needed help fundraising. She explained, “I didn’t have to panhandle much, but I did help people panhandling, that was definitely not my favorite thing. Cause it’s just hard. But I helped people do it. A lot of people on my ride just did only panhandling.” Carrie (2009 rider) also tried to help her teammate meet the required deadlines. “I helped one of my

teammates who was panhandling at the last minute too because he was still trying to make his fundraising total. That was an option [for my fundraising], but it wasn't a good personality fit for me," she explained.

For those who were not as successful in their letter writing, panhandling was a way to supplement that campaign. Arthur (2008 rider) panhandled to reach deadlines, and realized that it was an eye-opening experience.

I panhandled a lot. And that, that was actually a surprising experience . . . I realized that the people who donated to panhandlers weren't the people driving the nice cars or anything. It was the Hispanic mom in a mini-van with her three kids and working like two jobs or something, and she's digging through her ashtray trying to find some coins and stuff. And I thought that was a really cool experience. It was like people who don't have that much were giving all they could give, and that was eye opening to me.

Marcus (2012 rider) didn't always have a good experience, though, when panhandling. He described one encounter with an individual who said, "cancer is good for society when people would die . . . I'm like, 'Okay. Well, fuck you too.' Yeah, that's so rude." This reaction, however, was unusual and panhandling provided quick interactions with others that helped riders see that cancer is more than just their personal story.

Finally, individuals also utilized more unique ways to raise money. Social media was used to "disperse the information" explained Carrie (2009 rider). It was easy to connect with others through "bombing my people on Facebook, harassing my friends, going to relatives," said Rick (2009 rider). He also said,

I set up a lot of stuff with organizations back . . . where I'm from. Working with schools, but like old high school teachers of mine. Working with like local businesses to set up like, 'I am riding from Texas to Alaska, if you have any spare change please give it.'"

Garage sales were popular and one rider made and sold tamales. Anna's (2013 rider) family got involved.

[My aunt] decided for me that she decided was going to organize this huge event for me in . . . Florida. And, so she started calling me every week or so, telling me "Hey, like I got this sponsor to give us this, and there's going to be three caterers." And then the next week she'd tell me she got two performers. And then the next week, she asked me if we could do a live auction of different stuff and I was like, sure, and then started just getting so many different people to donate different things. And what started out as a small art auction—because I'm a painter—and so the whole entire point was to have a small dinner and tell people about Texas 4000 and potentially sell some of my paintings to fundraise. It became this incredible, incredible huge event, where people were buying different things, and . . . caterers were bringing different food from all these different places just because they knew about the cause, and we raised so much money. I think we raised \$2,000 that day. And I was able to talk about Texas 4000 and really get so many different people's stories, and . . . that experience was incredible because . . . I got a person in my family who cares so much about me to care so much about Texas 4000 as well.

Kelly (2012 rider) went outside the Austin area to fundraise as well—with one of her teammates.

Cancer had, especially in [my hometown], had always been this looming thing, and I was always so shocked by, in a town so small, how we had had so many people who had been

affected by cancer . . . so we held a spaghetti dinner fundraiser, and my high school job at the pizza place . . . donated all of the pasta and sauce and every food item we needed for the event. And my church . . . set up like a big kitchen and a big dining hall when it needs to, and so we have the space that was completely donated . . . so we had a little spaghetti dinner, music, fundraiser, and we made little posters about ourselves and why we're doing it, and had a donation box and all that kind of stuff and we made a good amount of money off of that. I think we each walked away with almost \$1,000 from it.

These individuals showed some creativity that spread the message and awareness to members of the community.

Riders were usually updated of weekly progress at team meetings and through shared documents. This served to assist riders in meeting the requirements—much as deadlines were. Carrie (2009 rider) recalled, “feeling really protective of people who weren't quite at their goals yet. And then I remember feeling really excited for people who had met their goals.”

The assistance of friends and family members was common throughout discussions of fundraising. In addition to her childhood neighbors, Jenny (2010 rider) described how her family assisted her fundraising efforts. “ My grandma loves something to get behind and so once she was on board with this happening. . . . She would tell anybody about it. So I got donations from all kinds of random people.” Abigail (2008 rider) said, “My Dad encouraged a lot of his coworkers to donate too, because the company would actually match what they donate.” Robin (2009 rider) explained how she received help from others, “I'm from a very small town in West Texas. And so, after word started getting out that I was doing this. My hometown newspaper did

this big article on me, and then, my mom's church was really talking me up." Calvin's (2007 rider) connections made his fundraising experience much easier than expected.

It was actually gainfully easy for me but then again, my best friend is a lawyer, my parents are retired, there is plenty of money in my world. I didn't have to be like, "All right. I have five bucks this week. I'll be begging for money otherwise." It was a little anticlimactic, to be honest.

Others discussed the lessons they learned through fundraising. Carrie (2009 rider) described the practical life lessons she learned. "One thing that I think Texas 4000 did for me, which was, probably how I ended up in my current line of work to be honest with you, is it taught me that it's ok to ask people that you don't know for money," she said. Carrie further elaborated on how she learned this lesson:

If you connect on a really personal level it makes it so rewarding for you because you're trying to ride a bike to Alaska, and to hear about you know, somebody's aunt that is having a really hard time, and just knowing that it is important to that person that's donating to your cause and you're riding for them, and I think is really special.

For Jenny (2010 rider), the fundraising ended up not being about the money, but the people.

The money is very important and it does very important things. But for me, I have been, and still am more passionate about like the people aspect. Telling people, sharing experience for people, being the outlet . . . so that was something I was more passionate about I think, because I mean lots of people donate money and our money is important, but lots of people can donate money, not everybody can go to the middle of nowhere in

Nevada and have the trust with someone to be able to tell them, well this is what you would look for, and that they would actually take that and internalize it.

Volunteering

Volunteering has become another key component of participating in Texas 4000. Although in the early years, the focus was on getting the ride organized, and not on volunteering. Emily (2004 rider) said, “Our year it was so focused on ‘if this ride doesn’t happen . . . it’s never going to happen again.’ So I feel like we were really focused on we need to do it.” Currently, as Carolyn (2012 rider) explains, participants spend most of their first semester on the team volunteering and supporting the previous team. “We did mostly volunteering. Well not mostly. We started out with, when we got into the organization for a full 7 or 8 months we only do volunteering.”

Volunteering requirements came about as more sponsors began supporting the team. “They would ask us to volunteer, and so we would have to have a certain number of Texas 4000 people go and volunteer to do this,” explained Jenny (2010 rider). Some people resented that they were asked to volunteer for non-cancer related events, while others enjoyed volunteering because they got to know their teammates better, got to meet people in the community and hear their stories, and they just liked racing in general.

Meeting people and hearing their stories was a common reason for enjoying volunteering. Jenny (2010 rider) explained that she enjoyed volunteering because

I liked meeting people. And also, I just really enjoyed this like new community of people . . . because there are so many different kinds of people and people are just interesting.

People have interesting stories. And so I really liked meeting different people . . . it was never a burden for me. I really enjoyed doing it.

And she went into great detail about two events where she was able to meet people and hear their stories.

We did Bikes for Kids in Austin, around Christmas time . . . and it's just one of those things where I think in disclosing about yourself people also kind of open up and disclose about themselves, and so there was one lady in particular who she saw us wearing our jerseys and that we were volunteering, and so kind of told her about what we did and she just started crying, kind of telling us about herself and some of her experiences and not at all cancer related just kind of what her family was going through, and that she is getting a bike for her daughter for Christmas and she was so excited. So, that one was really neat, just because it wasn't at all cancer related, but just in kind of disclosing about myself she was willing and eager to share about herself.

In another instance, Jenny was able to meet someone who did have a cancer-related story to tell.

She was heavily involved in Jack and Adam's [a Texas 4000 sponsor] and did their group rides and volunteered to help organize things for them when they did the triathlons. And so she was just a really interesting person. . . . I ended up talking to her and getting to know her better and why . . . she was interested in the cause and her whole story, her mother had died of cancer.

Lauren (2011 rider) and Sydney (2013 rider) also enjoyed participating because they were able to meet others. Sydney felt that these events were good for Texas 4000 because they helped spread the message.

Those were my favorite because you got to talk to people about what you're doing, and what they're doing. And you're both really passionate about a similar topic. So volunteering at fundraisers was really fun, and it was a really good way to practice the mission. Because that was something that you could get out when you're in Texas 4000 you could just basically start off with picture perfect image of what the organization is and does and why you love it.

Thomas (2009 rider) felt that volunteering helped him get to know his teammates better. He said, "We volunteered for the Shiner, the Austin to Shiner Ride and that was a really good event that I enjoyed doing and I felt like I met more people and had more things to talk about with them after that." As an athlete, Eric (2013 rider) said he enjoyed volunteering at races,

because I like actually racing. So its always fun to be on the other side...not only did you get to help other people who were on the ride, you got to sit and talk with your teammates too. Because a lot of working at the water stops is just sitting there.

Rachel (2012 rider) explained she was able to find inspiration at one of the non-cancer-related-events:

It was great to be around like athletic people that gave you hope. One of the triathlons I volunteered for, there was a paraplegic division, and it was just like so cool to see people who didn't have both of their legs, biking better than I was biking. And it was just so inspiring to see someone running with one leg and a wounded soldier and that was really, really cool. That was one of the coolest things that I had seen.

There were some cancer-related volunteering events—usually tied into hospital visits in which students would be able to take a tour of the facility and visit with patients in the hospital.

Francie (2010 rider) said one children's hospital they visited "was hosting a Easter egg hunt and we would go and help the kids who couldn't walk on their own or who couldn't participate, like keep them company." At one of the beneficiaries (a hospital) of Texas 4000, Kelly (2012 rider) and her teammates were able "to visit and have the researchers present to us. . . . It was around Halloween, so we did trick or treating with the kids there. They showed us where the Texas 4000 garden was going to be, and now it exists." Jack (2012 rider) described a visit to the same hospital:

[It was] really eye-opening. We didn't go and see any patients. But we were there, we got to go see our researcher, in his lab, which was really cool. We got to see some other places like they had a wig room, and some other things they just showed us some patient rooms where people get treatment. We got to go visit [our teammate] there. Once. Maybe twice. So it was just really powerful to see what kind of things are being done, and how we're helping that.

While volunteering was not required for many years, it was an important part of the preparation for the ride for some. It allowed them to connect with a larger community, with their teammates, and to help others in need.

THE JOURNEY

The Atlas Ride

The Atlas Ride, is a major milestone in the experience as it signifies the beginning of a journey that many have been eagerly anticipating. "Time wise, the summer ride is seventy days, compared to the year and half you've been doing Texas 4000," explained Jack, "You are seventy

percent done with your Texas 4000 experience.” Despite the short time period, the ride itself is full of experiences that many will never forget.

The Atlas Ride is a fundraiser for the team in which the public is invited to participate and ride twenty-five, fifty, or seventy miles. Participants often invite their friends and family to help celebrate the start of the ride. “After you had all this anticipation, you get to the first day, and you’re riding with hundreds of people because the first day is a big event,” said Eric (2013 rider), “Your family’s usually there, so it’s the last time you’ll see your family for almost two and a half months. So it’s a really big deal to a lot of people.” Judy (2009 rider) was able to ride with her sister, and really enjoyed being able to share that experience:

We did about forty odd miles and she was getting tired so someone picked her up and I go, “Ok, well, I’ll see you at the Vineyard.” And I was maybe two or three miles from the vineyard. And whoever had picked her up was driving by, and she asked them to pull over. She’s like “No, I’m going to finish this with you.” So, I was like “Ok.” And it took forever, but we got to the vineyard and she did about forty-three to forty-four out of the fifty miles that day. So I was really proud of her, and it was just a really neat bonding experience for me and my sister to do that, cause it was just me and her riding along for most of the day. Just getting to share that with her, I think that was really nice start to the summer.

Diane (2009 rider) rode with a family friend who was able to empower her:

Our family friend that kind of had been teaching us tricks and stuff, he was like “You’re faster than this, I know you are.” He was like come on, and he set the pace. So he’s in front of me and he’s drafting me, and that is the first time I would say that I really pushed

myself to do what I thought I would be incapable of. And then I was riding with fast girls and I was like, this is crazy, I can't do this. And I think, I would say that sums up my Texas 4000 experience; I don't like to think of myself as a pessimist, but I never thought I was going to achieve all that. And all of a sudden it was like "Ok, I CAN ride faster than I think I can, I CAN fundraise more than I think I can." So for me it was a very empowering experience.

Routes

For most, the day after the Atlas Ride marked the day that the team split into separate routes. Until 2013, there were two routes that participants could choose from—Rockies and Sierra. In 2013, the Ozarks route was added. Participants were able to choose their routes, and a lot of thought went into choosing a route, but ultimately the decision for many came down to what route their friends wanted to do or what part of the country they wanted to see (see Figure 5.2 for an approximate map of where routes go, as the routes change slightly every year).

Figure 5.2: Texas 4000 Routes



Anna (2013 rider) provided a brief summary of the differences.

Ozarks, Sierra, and Rockies all had their very different experiences and very different dynamics. And when you go Rockies, you are expected to have like the roughin' it experience, throughout the entire summer. That's what you do. Sierra is all about being a Type A personality, getting somewhere, getting there on time and we called it Sierradise, like a paradise. Yea, you're biking to Alaska, but you're also being pampered all the time. And, Ozarks, has a blend of both a roughin' it, but also having a really incredible hosts who pamper you a lot.

Jack (2012 rider) added that there are also sights to consider when selecting a route:

They both hit like gorgeous national parks. I'm jealous they [Sierra] got to go see Zion and Lake Tahoe and Crater Lake. . . . And we [Rockies] got to do Grand Tetons and Yellowstone and Glacier, Banff, which is the Canadian Rockies, which was gorgeous. So there's those appeals. Some people like Sierras because they're in civilization for longer. Rockies camps twenty-eight days, Sierra camps a lot, but not that much. And some people like that or want to be in California and the Pacific Northwest.

Rachel (2012 rider) explained, "I didn't know anyone well enough to preference my route, preference on anyone. I did it because I lived in California previously and I figured if I'm going to bike to Alaska I might as well do the most rugged, ridiculous route." On the other hand, Robin (2009 rider), "chose to be on the Rockies route for the people. I knew that there were just certain key people that had already expressed interest in the Rockies route, and I knew I wanted my experience to be with those people." Ultimately, this decision affected their experience.

Typical Day

After Day Zero and the Atlas Ride, most days followed a typical pattern: wake up, get ready, ride, arrive at destination, interact with hosts (if any), sleep. Some days instead of riding, a rider would have to SAG (an acronym for Support and Gear, used as a verb or noun, generally), or the entire team would have an off day. Typically, riders would get up in the morning, pack up, eat, do ride dedication circles, ride or SAG, arrive at their hosts or the campground, eat, present a program, and then go to sleep. Everything would then repeat the next day, until the teams reached Alaska. Each team did things slightly different, but that was a typical day for riders. Steven (2008 rider) remarked

There's a lot of focus that goes on with riding every single day. You need to be dedicated to wake up every morning and jump on your bike and still have that desire to want to do it all the time. Because it can be very draining.

Others, however, felt that the routine was very freeing. "It was great to only think about eating and sleeping and riding your bike. It's like that's all we did," said Rachel (2012 rider). Will (2006 rider) elaborated,

It was a very freeing and exciting moment to be able to just ride a bike, and the simplicity and the beauty of riding your bike to Alaska can't be overstated. It's just waking up, riding your bike, eating, socializing, meeting new people, hanging out with your friends, making new friendships, still getting to know people.

Arthur (2008 rider) reiterated these sentiments in the following statement.

It just became more routine. This is what you do, of course you wake up at 5am to ride your bike every day. But the one really cool thing about doing that, though, was that was your only responsibility for the day, and I think that was really relieving, or it felt good knowing that the only thing you had to do was ride your bike. You didn't have to worry about homework, or tests, or obligations outside of just riding your bike.

Carrie (2009 rider) described it as getting to "be a kid again all summer. And, worry about getting from point A to point B on your bike and that was pretty much it. Like I didn't have to worry about my thesis that summer at all."

Occasionally, something out of the ordinary would happen—a crash or accident, a challenge, meeting back up with other teams, and reaching Alaska. The following sections will be organized according to a typical day—Ride Dedication Circles, Cycling and SAGging, and

Hosts. These sections are then followed by key points along the ride including meeting back up with the other teams and the last ten days of the ride.

Ride Dedication Circles

Ride dedication circles happened every morning, after the team had packed up and was ready to leave for the day. The team would get in a circle and individual members would volunteer and talk about who they were riding for that day and express their thoughts and feelings. Hosts were often invited to participate, and if someone was visiting the team, they too were invited to share their stories. The Ride Dedication Circles were instrumental to the experience because they helped give focus and inspiration to the ride, they allowed teammates to learn about others, and for some offered the opportunity to talk about something they had never been able to talk about before. As Robin (2009 rider) put it “Every day they would refocus us as to why we were on the ride. And it was great to be able to learn new stories of hope and inspiration every day from those ride dedications.”

Many participants felt reengaged with the purpose of the ride after the ride dedication circles. For some it seemed that those on the ride would begin to think of it as an adventure or forget that they were riding for a reason. Arthur (2008 rider) said,

I think before the ride you're there because you think, “yea, you're in a charity organization, your purpose is to raise money and fight cancer, all that good stuff.” But then when you actually get going, I think it also becomes more of just a summer adventure. And, that's something I think people don't really expect or they don't handle as well, cause you're on your own, in the middle of the country, in the middle of nowhere, just fighting for yourself. Yea there is the whole cancer backdrop to it. But it

kind of plays a backseat to just having fun for the summer. And then I think it's kind of unfortunate.

Michael (2006 rider) added that during his year,

Everyone just kind of had a change of attitude about a week into the ride. And people would finish—people would take something like twelve hours to finish a sixty-five mile day. Which is incredibly slow, people can run faster than that, like people were taking naps during the day and watching movies on the laptop during the day and going to a full service restaurant like in their cycling clothes. . . . That was a little strange to me. And too, I noticed at the beginning of the summer they would refer to the summer as—they kept using the word “the ride,” “the ride,” “the ride;” and then by the end of the summer they kept saying “the trip,” “the trip,” “the trip.” And I think it just kind of reflected a change in attitude that was across the board really.

Judy (2009 rider) explained the ride dedication circles, though, were great for refocusing on the purpose of the ride.

Everyone would say who they were riding for that day, and every now and then someone would sort of say, “You know, I’m having a really hard time because of x, y, or z” or “Someone x, y, or z wrote to me and they’re having a hard time could you please ride for them.” And so, [it was] just sort of a way to remind you of what you were doing and why you were doing it and who you were doing it for.

Rachel (2012 rider) described a time that dedicating a ride to someone else gave her a reason to finish a very tough day:

It just kind of helps center you and keeps you focused. Then were days that I only literally finished a ride because I was riding for someone that day, and I couldn't give up. An alumni reached out to me in Canada . . . we knew each other prior to the ride and he emailed and he was like "you're riding the same route that I did." He did it in 2009 I believe, and he was like "you know you're riding my favorite days of my summer and it's just making me think you know about my experience and my uncle just with he had two young children and he just recently found out that he has some type of brain cancer, I believe, and if you would ride a day for him, like one of these great days that are the best. It would mean a lot." And so I rode, what I thought was one of our hardest days of 104 miles, really, really hilly and at one point the van . . . [was] like "listen, the place will be giving us showers and the city is going to close, so get in the van so you can take a shower." And I was like "I'm not going to do that, like I've put in 94 miles to ride these last miles." . . . One of the other girls rode with me that day and she was like "you know I want to shower but I want to do whatever you want to do," and so we just kept riding. I wouldn't have finished that day . . . but instead it was way more important for me because I told him I was riding for his uncle. And so, we both finished riding because of that. So the ride dedications are really, really important for that reason.

Jack (2012 rider) had a similar story to tell about one ride dedication circle:

If it's a tough day you really want to dedicate to someone who's having a really tough time. Cause like the ride is kind of a metaphor for the fight against cancer because it's long and it's hard and it's tough and it's not easy. So, we're fighting in our own way kind of getting to experience what they go through a little bit. But not even. It doesn't come

close. But we can try to imagine and then use our strength to give them strength. We ride for those who can't. So, we're in the ride dedication circle every morning, we'll just share what we're feeling for that day or who we're riding for if it's a special day or something like that. . . . And then . . . Day 69, before we rode in, we stayed at this church with this really awesome pastor. Who has had a lot of really good things to say. He had lost his wife to cancer. So, and since it was the morning of our last day we were riding into Anchorage, it was very emotional. But, I felt it was a good release and it was just amazing to hear him talk and he was on board with what we were doing, so it was like "cancer sucks." And it does. It sucks. I hate it. So that's why we ride. But, everybody was in tears that morning in the ride circle. It's very powerful and a really good reminder—like why we're here, and why we're doing this, why people care about what we're doing.

Hearing others' ride dedications meant a lot to the individuals. They were able to listen and connect with them, and learn about their struggles—which had a big impact on a personal level. Jack (2012 rider) explained,

A lot of times the host who let us spend the night at their facility will be in the circle with us, and if they share that's a really special experience, and I really appreciate that because you understand why they're doing what they're doing. . . . It's because they have a connection to the cause, that they understand and it resonates with them.

Michael (2006 rider) described an encounter with one host during a ride dedication circle that let him learn more about someone whom he had just met:

It was the last day, and a lot of people had saved one [ride dedication], so it was a long dedication and Pastor John got involved, he got in a circle and he asked us to ride for his

wife Polly, she died of breast cancer, between five and ten years ago. And, he cried like a baby. He just, you could tell, loved his wife so much, and this meant a lot to him. And, when we got done with dedications, just everyone had saved their biggest one, so everyone was crying. I just made a beeline, not to my teammates, but straight to Pastor John. Because something about his [story] stood out to me. I just gave him a big ol' hug, and said "I ride for Polly."

Carrie (2009 rider) was also affected by another host's experience with cancer that she learned about during a ride dedication circle.

Charlie, who has this big old cowboy hat and white beard and everything. And he had esophageal cancer, and he was just determined to fight as much as he could about it. . . . It affected me because you could just tell from the prognosis it was not going to turn out well. . . . And I feel like he really needed us that day. So we rode for him, and then unfortunately we found out that he passed away a couple of months later. But he was really, really sweet. . . . That's just like one of the stories that I have, and I'm getting tears in my eyes right now, so you can imagine. I just feel so lucky to have so many stories like that. Cause especially when you think about, a lot of people our age and students are, really, for better or for worse, self-centered and to have that type of experience at such a young age, it prepares you to be a better human being in the long run.

Robin (2009 rider) said she and Diane, who had both lost parents to cancer, learned a lot from their teammates during a ride dedication circle:

We had heard some of our teammates express "I don't feel worthy to be on this ride because I didn't lose anybody close to me to cancer. And I feel like a phony because I'm

on this ride.” And, they had expressed that to both Diane and I, and so Diane and I were talking about it one day and just saying, “that’s bogus. I think it’s even more admirable that they have such a passion for finding a cure for cancer, and they didn’t lose anybody.” Because I never would’ve gone on Texas 4000 had I not lost my father to cancer. And so, one day Diane and I, during ride dedication, we dedicated our ride that day to the friends on the team that joined the ride just because they had this passion to raise money for cancer research without having that direct connection to it. Because by that point they did have that direct connection to us.

Diane’s (2009 rider) father even came out to meet the team in one city, and provided a valuable lesson for many team members. She recalled,

He did the ride circle with us, and he was like guys don’t be afraid to tell each other that you love each other. . . . And like the guys still joke about it, in a meaningful way. Like “I still tell people that I love them because of your dad.”

Rick (2009 rider) provided more details about the incident.

[Diane’s father], he’s a Texas oilman. . . . He used to play football I think for Missouri. So he starts speaking because we were doing the ride dedication, and a lot it was like, “I want to dedicate this to [Diane’s] family. [Diane’s father], thank you for taking us out for dinner last night. It was wonderful it was so nice of you. We all see what a great job that you’ve done with you know Diane.” . . . But, then he starts speaking. And he was talking about when his wife was sick. That one of his friends called him up. It’s a friend of his who used to play football with him at Missouri who’s now in the NFL. But the guy, when he was talking to [Diane’s father] was like, “I just wanted to let you know Dave that I

love you and I'm here for you." And [Diane's father] told us, he said to us guys, "it's ok to say to another man that you love him if you mean it." And I remember after that . . . the rest of us, all the guys, who for the entire forty days preceding had been giving shout outs to other guys on the Rockies team, but being like "Jeff I think its really cool what you do." But not wanting to say it. Well all of a sudden, all of us broke down we were just like, "Jeff I love you, you're like an incredible person, the way you helped me out a few days ago was just incredible, so selfless. I really admire the way you carry yourself and what you've done for this team, and what you've done for me to help me solve my problems." I mean we had so many guys telling other guys that they love each other.

Finally, the ride dedication circles provided some a chance to open up about their experience with cancer—something that they had previously not been able to do. Thomas (2009 rider) had lost his mother and said,

What I ended up getting out of the ride more than anything, and I said this at one of the last team's circles. . . . I feel like it got me closure on my mom dying because I talked about it, which I had never [done] beforehand, really ever, even to my family. I have an older brother, so like when my mom died, it was . . . three dudes living in a house, we're not really going to talk about feelings that much. It's just not going to happen. And it never really did happen. And I was put in a position where every morning we would talk, you would say who you were riding for, why you were riding for them. And I had other people I was riding for as well, from soliciting family and friends, some of whom were cancer survivors, some of whom asked for to ride for people, I could talk about those. But the reason why I was there was my mom, and so I was put in a position where I could

talk about it and eventually I did talk about it. And I feel to a large extent, that is the best thing that came out of that, was telling those stories and working through it with myself even on what it meant to me that I was doing this thing.

Diane (2009 rider) had a similar experience in regards to opening up about losing her father:

I hadn't talked that much about my dad on the ride so far, and really I remember probably the first time, I did on the ride, was when we were riding into Colorado Springs. . . . and so the ride dedication that morning I shared out this bible verse that really helped me when I was struggling with my dad passing away. And it basically just states finding joy in adverse situations and finding joy in pain. And being able to be joyful that you're able to still experience that. And so, I shared with my team this bible verse and I shared with them, how, through that time, I was able to find joy by wearing red high heels to my dad's funeral and a floral dress, that was my way of being joyful about his life. And, just different situations like that. And, that ride dedication was so incredible. I started crying and then I just remember looking around and every single team member was crying with me. And so that was a huge step in me starting to put the pieces back together and feel whole again.

Cycling

Cycling was a major component of the summer, as riders could spend anywhere from three hours to twelve hours on a bicycle. It allowed riders to grow closer as teammates, see places and things they had never seen before and likely would have missed traveling by car, deal with challenging situations such as bad weather or getting lost or crashes, and supporting each other through SAG.

Riders said you got to know your teammates on the road. Team members made many great connections with other teammates because “when you’re biking, you’re talking to so many of your teammates in a way that you can’t really talk to anybody else because you can only make small talk for so long,” explained Anna (2013 rider).

Immediately you then took these very deep conversations that you never would’ve gotten into before with anybody, and you start talking about your faith, and you start talking about what you think about life, start talking about the difficulties that you’ve been through. Or you talk about who you’re riding for that day.

At a certain “point in the ride too, not only are you out in the middle of nowhere, but you also are starting to run out of, I don’t know if polite is not the word right, but you’re starting to become a lot more uninhibited about what you’re sharing with your teammates,” said Thomas (2009 rider). He further explained,

It felt like everybody was working towards the same goal. We were all trying to accomplish something together and it’s an experience I’ve never had doing anything before or since . . . the sense of we are all in this together, we are a group, we are something larger than us and we are out doing a strange thing together for a greater goal.

Ultimately, by the middle of the summer riders had found good friends to ride with. “At first, I was conscious of you have to bike with everyone in the summer. But, in one day it changes so much—you might start with one group and then end up last. It depends on the day,” remarked Marcus (2012 rider), “But I found certain people in the team that I rode well with, and then I usually went to them to ride.” Robin (2009 rider) provided the following description of

how her relationship with Diane was forged on the bike, and the subject matter of these conversations still shook her emotionally when she described them:

Diane and I would ride together a lot. Just the two of us, and we would just have these insanely powerful conversations. Being able to ask each other things that, nobody had ever asked us because they would feel uncomfortable about it. So I remember one of the conversations. We were just . . . telling each other about what our parents funerals were like . . . and I think being able to talk about that in such a loving environment where there was no judgment. That was just incredible. And so we would just, we would have these powerful conversations. And then we would be able to tell our teammates about them. And it was also really powerful to see how recapping these conversations to our teammates really affected them to. And so, I think through the process of us both working through a lot of these emotions, our team felt like they had a huge part in that also.

She described how, in one of their really powerful conversations, they felt that they were making a difference by riding their bikes to Alaska:

There was something about the actual physicality of the ride that made it feel like we were changing the world. When we were both watching our parents suffer from this horrible disease and just lose their strength, lose their hair, lose weight, we both felt so helpless. We felt like we couldn't do anything to help them, and that was one of the hardest things to accept. That there's just this disease taking the life out of our parents, but we had to just sit there and watch it. And Texas 4000 gave us the ability to be able to physically do something about it. So every pedal we felt like we were making a difference. And being able to let out physical aggression and just make ourselves

exhausted everyday was so empowering, and it made me feel like I was able to make up for the times that I felt so helpless when I was watching my dad pass away.

Carrie (2009 rider) also described learning about a teammate's experience with cancer one day on the ride:

One of my teammates had lost her mother two years previously to cancer. And we knew for a while that the anniversary was coming up and we knew it was going to be a really hard day for her. And so that day we just kind of all got together and rode for her mom and rode for her, and then the whole day—it was one of my favorite days of the ride where I rode along side of her and she told us the stupidest stories, but just these stupid silly fun little memories of her mom and she had a blast. And she was crying at one point and all of us are like crying alongside her, but she's laughing too.

Arthur's (2008 rider) riding buddy shared many similarities, including riding ability. "He was also a sophomore, so we were the same age, and we had similar riding capabilities as well, or skill. So we were good riding partners as well."

Lauren (2011 rider) was unable to ride her bike for much of the journey and SAGged instead. She observed,

A lot of people did their bonding on the bike cause once you're off the bike you're interacting with hosts or you are sleeping. I think that it was a little bit challenging [for me], I would have the person that I was SAGging with, so that was about it. Actually I had some of my teammates tell me about half way through the ride, "I can't believe there are so many people in groups that [you] don't know that well. You're never on your bike." . . . [Those relationships] did become so intimate so fast because not only are you

sharing all this private information about yourself but you're spending every day, all day with each other. You see the best, or the worst, side of someone because everyone, regardless of what it was, everyone was struggling with something. Whether it was homesickness, being on the bike everyday, whether it was injury.

In addition to building relationships, bicycling allowed participants to see things they never had before, in a way they never expected. I "just saw the world in this way that I didn't know is possible, and I've done a lot of road trips but it's not the same to take all day to go an hour in the car," explained Calvin (2007 rider). Carrie (2009 rider) further elaborated on this feeling and said that part of the adventure was:

seeing just the beautiful places and appreciating them a lot more because it takes a lot more to ride your bike up a hill than it does to drive uphill. And you get connected to that sense of place and the smells and the sounds and everything else.

The three different routes allowed participants to see many different places and things they had never seen before. Eric (2013 rider) described the sights, sounds, and thoughts along the journey:

There were no clouds for the first week we were leaving. Its just like "is this real, is this happening?" The sky was just so much bigger than you're used to seeing because you're spending just hours and hours outside staring at it. . . . As you leave Texas, you start to see mountains and hills and more of a desert. And just the scenery changes so much as you go across the country. . . . In part of California, there's just so many hills and mountains and elevation changes. So the scenery is just gorgeous. It's beyond anything you can imagine, just seeing it everyday and seeing how it changes as you ride up along the route. So it's just this backdrop of huge ideas and just the grandness of the world. . . .

The scenery is just spectacular. There's nothing like seeing the country by bike. Again just cause every day it's a new scene. You're never going to see the same thing twice.

Anthony (2009 rider) described how some of the sights affected him and made him realize that not every place is well kept or beautiful. He said, "I know one of the different things that I experienced was all of the different cities in the US, because I had never seen many of them." One particular place stood out. After riding through Albuquerque,

We started to go up to the reservation area. That place was kind of like a little bit heart breaking cause you could tell there were a lot of beer cans everywhere. I don't know it was just heart breaking the way there was this place in the US that was kind of semi-neglected or maybe wanted to be neglected.

The ride allowed students to see new things and learn more about the country. In general individuals described beautiful places, but the ride also presented many challenges in the form of difficult weather and bicycle crashes. Weather issues ranged from heat to wind to rain. "There were a lot of days that weren't good riding conditions, very cold and wet in Canada or really hot and windy in the country," explained Calvin (2007 rider). Diane (2009 rider) said she, "always joked it felt like being a mailman, rain, sleet, snow and hail. You're either so hot or freezing and it's raining on you and coming from every single direction. I mean there's definitely those glorious, perfect days." Wind made for tough days for some. "There are a few days where the wind was just relentless. If you're only going half the speed, you'll feel like I don't make any progress at all especially when there's a long way that's left to go," said Calvin (2007 rider). Jack (2012 rider) described two days in which the wind was particularly bad, and used another rider's story to overcome the difficulties:

There was a day in Oklahoma that we called the treadmill. Cause it was sixty miles of straight flat into a headwind and nothing. . . . We're going six, seven miles an hour. And that sucked. That was a hard day. . . . There was also a day in Wyoming where we hit thirty mile an hour headwinds, with gusts up to thirty-five. And there was one part during the ride, where our ride leader was like "guys it's not safe. So if you've been blown off the road, I'm going to, I ask you to stop." I hadn't been blown off the road because I guess I have good control of my bike. So I kept going. And there was like a couple of us who hadn't gotten blown off the road by that point. So eventually it got down to me and this guy, we were the only two guys left on the road. It was a ninety-mile day, maybe more than that. But like we were in the last bits of the ride. We were about to finish. . . . [This guy] was riding for his brother that day. So that was really important to him, so he really wanted to finish the ride. His knee was hurting real bad. And I was ready to tuck it in cause everybody else had, and just drive to where we're staying that night. But [he] really wanted to ride, so I was like, "alright, if you want to ride, I'll ride." There's no reason why I shouldn't.

Overwhelmingly, though, the biggest weather complaint was the rain. Judy (2009 rider) said the weather helped forge a bond between teammates:

We had some difficult days with the rain, I think we got rained on a lot . . . but I think that really helped us. . . . Our team, the particular route that I was on, I think we really bonded and I think that had to do with the mix of personalities that we had.

Rain made it really easy to fall into a bad mood. "The year we went it rained a lot, and so when it was raining, it was really easy to let yourself to fall into a sour attitude. Because you're cold,

it's really hard to ride in the rain. Its kind of miserable," explained Robin (2009 rider), who then added, "but we were just such an atmosphere of positivity, I don't really feel like the rain affected us." Crashes and illnesses also increased in bad weather. Robin said, "The rain was one of the reasons why I fell off my bike. And it was just a very cold, cold, summer for us because of the rain." Her accident occurred in Canada, and she was unable to finish the last ten days of the ride. "For me that was the hardest part, not being able to ride with my team, I just had to ride in the van every day," she explained. She added,

I fell off my bike because we were going over a bridge that had like metal grates in it, so the snow can just fall through it. And it was raining that day, and of course if metal gets wet, it's going to be slick. None of us thought about that. And so we all come down this hill onto this bridge and we're flying, I was going thirty miles an hour when I fell off my bike. But there were two of us that fell off, and so we were both able to commiserate together and talk each other into still being positive about it. . . . [The executive director flew to Alaska and she] gives me a hug and I just start crying. She had already known that I was injured. And I'm just telling her how much it sucks that I can't ride with my team and how I just want to be on my bike so badly and its really hard just riding in the car and watching them. And she mentioned to me the ride is a metaphor for a battle with cancer, and some people's battles with cancer are more physical, and some people's are more mental and so she told me that right now I'm just having to fight a mental battle. That it still doesn't discredit that it's still a tough battle to fight. And so I think at that point, it made me think about getting injured differently.

Robert (2011 rider) was hit by a truck and had to go to the hospital. Upon his return to the team, he realized that he was a part of the team, and his teammates truly cared for him:

I get hit by this truck that's going on this highway and so I fly forward and . . . going through the air I hit some of these other riders and they fall off their bikes and then I hit the street and I'm out. And apparently blood is coming down my face and so some of the riders are freaking out. . . . I was in the hospital for two days, and I remember after they said everything was ok, and they let me go, then I got back with the team. I got back in the middle of the night and I think half the people were probably already asleep. But, then I remember the team being so excited to have me back, see me again, see that I was ok. And I wasn't dead, after being hit by a car...[that's] where I realized like I was a part of the team. Because I think I got a sense of what I was able to contribute based on what they were saying in that dedication circle. So just hearing about how they were really hoping for me to pull through, and, how broken up it would've been, had I not made it.

Others came into the ride with injuries from training. Overcoming these provided an unusual experience for them. Anna (2013 rider) thought that she wouldn't be able to ride (see pg. 83). She was very glad that she was able to ride some, though. "Thankfully over the summer I was able to ride more and more each day." Lauren's (2011 rider) summer was marked by injury and an accident. She was able to ride through the injury she acquired in the spring:

In the beginning it was pretty much I was SAG support every single day...[then after a check-up on the ride, a doctor said that the] only bad that's going to happen by you riding your bike, you might build up a little more scar tissue, but you're going to need surgery regardless. And so he suggested like taking it easy on the hills and slowly building my

way back into riding but he said the same thing. If I really wanted to ride, just go ahead and ride. So I was so excited, because that's what I really wanted to do.

Similar to Robin, she further explained,

For some people riding their bike every day was this huge challenge that they had to overcome. But for me the big challenge was, all by myself, being there to support my teammates and knowing that me being on the bike wasn't the important part, that was not what Texas 4000 was all about, as much as that was what I wanted it to be about.

Then, in the last week, she had an accident and "broke my humerus and tore my rotator cuff . . . so I didn't ride at all the last week and a half." Her accident was very frustrating for her,

because I felt like I had finally, I'd been dealing with the knee pain throughout riding and but it was something I overcame. So I was excited to be back on my bike and things were kind of coming to an end with the ride anyway, and so it was something I was having a hard time with the fact that the ride was about to be over, and then I fell off of my bike.

Will's (2006 rider) experience was vastly different. He had been injured going into the summer, but wanted to try to complete the ride. "My plan was if I got to a point where I couldn't ride I was just going to walk. And so that's what I did." His pain had gotten to the point that he found it very difficult to ride:

That day I decided just to strap on my backpack, that I had all my gear, and I walked fifteen miles that day after having rode maybe twenty or so. And [that's] the way I would do it, you know, going forward from that day. . . . It was an interesting turning point for me. . . . I got to where I was averaging fifteen miles pretty easily. I got to where I was

getting in twenty miles in one day I walked twenty-six miles in a day. I was really excited about walking a marathon.

Walking instead of riding provided a different perspective, and affected how he was able to build relationships, much like Lauren (2011 rider) when she had to SAG. He ended up walking 505 miles for the summer, and said “it was as you can imagine a very interesting perspective on the ride.” He elaborated by saying,

Whereas most of my buddies would partner with a different cyclist and ride together all day long for seventy miles or so, every single day I got to see every single rider because every rider would pass me, which was always fun to say hi to people, and I had a handful of riders that would frequently just slow down their bike and bike along side me for sometimes hours at a time. . . . The knee injury was definitely a growth experience for me. It was personal growth associated with having to survive that experience and making my own personal experience.

Riders also created opportunities to challenge themselves. Each route had “challenges,” which included riding approximately 200 miles in one day and climbing the highest paved road in America. The Dease Lake Challenge involves combining three days of riding into one. The route changed from year to year, but ranged between 205-214 miles in one day. Riders were selected from their team to participate, and completed the ride unsupported by SAG vehicles “because we made it to the point of making this on our own,” (Calvin, 2007 rider). It involved waking up early and just riding. Steven (2008 rider) explained,

The last twenty miles were the hardest, just because it was very hilly, it was dark, it was so cold, we’re exhausted. I’m exhausted. My mind is shutting down, my body is just

aching all over the place, it is so hard to pedal, and I'm in tears because it just hurt so bad. I'm cramping up. I'm out of food and I'm out of water. I know I'm bushed, it's twenty miles away, like it's nothing, I do this in my sleep. We make it, but the entire time, those last twenty miles just thinking about why I rode and the people that I've met along the way, and the people that I will meet in the future, that will benefit from the cause that I'm riding for. Not only for my year, but for all of the years going after that. It's a good thing. That's the only thing I could think about, like keep riding because there is so much more out here that you're going to do, so. That's all I could think about.

Lauren (2011 rider) did a challenge in Whistler that allowed her and her teammates to remember the reason they were riding.

Some people had kind of lost touch with what we were doing, just because there wasn't the challenging aspect, where you had to remind yourself like "oh I'm here for these people and that's why I'm doing this and so I'm going to get back on my bike." . . . But I think on the day of Whistler [the day of the challenge], it was this moment where we all kind of came back and "no, this is why I'm doing this." And so everyone had written all over them the people that they ride for, and we had one of our longest ride dedications at the beginning of it.

Jack (2012 rider) said his challenge was up to the "top of Mt. Evans, which is the highest paved road in North America. . . . We started 7,000 feet and ended at 13,000. Approximately 6,000 vertical feet of gain in twenty-eight miles." Being able to complete the ride with five of his teammates was an accomplishment that he was very proud of.

That rocked . . . just the challenge of it. The physical challenge, and riding your bike to the top of the highest paved road in the US, and the views when you got up there. A sense of accomplishment, and it's a privilege because everybody who wanted to do it put their name into a hat, and then our ride leader pulled six names out of the hat. And I was very thankful to be one of those names cause that's what I really wanted to do.

Even when not riding, there were challenges. Many individuals felt that SAGging was a difficult part of the ride because "you had to be responsible, you had to set out food, make sandwiches, it was miserable. I honestly always preferred riding to it" (Anthony, 2009 rider). As Diane (2009 rider) explained,

It was always harder on the days that you were SAGging than it was on the days you were riding, because you knew you had to support the entire team, so just trying to plan and you know how frustrating it is when you're having a hard day and the SAG vehicle is not there and set up with all the food and what not, it's rough. . . . [It] always felt like the longest day when you were SAGging.

Arthur (2008 rider) added,

It was pretty hectic to be a driver because you had to wake up everyone. You had to prepare breakfast for everyone. You had to pack up all the stuff and then you had to make sure everyone on the road was ok throughout the day. It was a lot of responsibility, especially if something bad happens. If someone gets a flat and then they don't have a tube, you've got to circle back, and then you have a rest stop to set up. And then a lot of logistical things, and then you had to meet up with the host for the night, prepare dinner.

Anna (2013 rider) described one particularly difficult day, the “infamous day thirteen.” The SAG vans had no food or water, and the cyclists were heading through some tough mountains. “Mentally we were prepared for the physical challenges that were about to face us. But little did we know that everything else was going to go wrong,” she explained. “And make it so that the physical part of it was the least of our worries, but also because all the other parts weren’t working, the physical became so much more difficult.” There were more climbs than expected, they were unable to drop off one of the trailers, they were unable to secure food or water donations from restaurants because “we realized that none of these people really had much business and that they weren’t going to be giving us anything because they didn’t have much to give. And continuously we got denied at different places.” They were unable to find open stores to purchase food, and those who were cycling were getting upset

because whenever you’re riding and you’re having a really tough day, it’s incredible to be able to come up to the rest stop and have this peanut butter and jelly sandwich waiting for you. . . . [And] to not have anything on the toughest of the summer up until then, was not only demoralizing. . . . It was impossible for these people to have the calories for energy that you needed to physically be able to ride through these horrible hills.

One of the vans got stuck, which led to an argument amongst the SAG drivers. “And it was just awful . . . everything that could have gone wrong happened that day.” It ended up being a learning experience, though, for the whole team. “That day I think we all really learned what not to do. As SAG. We started making a list of things that you need to do as sag that day, even before you leave.”

Connecting with Hosts and Others Along the Way

Another important component of the ride was interacting with the communities along the various routes and individuals outside of the organization. As Jack (2012 rider) expressed,

It's just really incredible the outpouring of support you get, and that I do feel like what we're doing is worth it and we're not just a bunch of kids riding our bikes to Alaska for fun. We're meeting people, and hearing their stories, and learning and sharing with them.

The generosity and support that the team found along the way had an impact on the riders, who found their interactions to be inspirational. Some interactions occurred while cycling, but most occurred after cycling had been completed for the day through interacting with hosts and giving programs to members of the larger communities. This allowed individuals to learn about how cancer had impacted others, and how cancer was not just a local or personal issue.

One of the reasons why we ride is to reach more people with our message. So wherever we can we give these presentations, we call it program. We give a presentation about cancer and cancer prevention and what we're doing to help the cause. (Jack, 2012 rider)

Programs served as one interaction point with various communities along the routes. Sometimes they even presented programs at hospitals:

[Programs] and visiting hospitals was where I kind of made the connection that this bike ride had anything to do with fighting cancer. Otherwise, "ok we rode a bike to Alaska for cancer. What difference does it make? I rode a bike to Alaska so someone's going to get better? That doesn't make any sense." But, the programs and the hospitals were probably the most important part of the ride . . . because that's when we connect to people. And the programs were designed to be educational so we can tell people like "hey, here's ways to

live a healthy life, so you're less likely to get cancer. And here's how to do a self-check, and make sure you wear sunscreen, and stuff like that. If you find something weird, ask a doctor. Here's what to look for." Maybe someone quit smoking because we talked to them. Or someone started wearing sunscreen, or maybe someone noticed this funny looking mole and asked a doctor about it. I like to think we made a small difference there. So that's what I thought was really important about our ride. Without it, it was just like a really cool vacation and we raised some money. (Michael, 2006 rider)

As Michael said, hospital visits helped make the connection to cancer. Carrie (2009 rider) was a program coordinator, and observed,

Some people were really shocked at what they saw; not everybody on our team had experience with cancer. It's not a prerequisite to join. You don't need to like know somebody that's had cancer. You just need to be really invested in the cause. And so I remember a lot of people not really being mentally prepared to see what a treatment center looks like...one of the centers that we went to was a pediatric cancer center in Denver. . . . It was good to see little kids even though they're fighting cancer, but with their families as well. . . . This house for them, essentially gives them the opportunity to be in a clean and safe space. And they have an onsite cook that helps them, and it's for not only the kids that are there but the families too. . . . These are things that I think people don't really think about until you're going through it. Where you don't think about how much gas it takes to go back and forth to a doctor's appointment or treatment. You don't think about how expensive it is and time consuming it is to worry about

getting groceries for your family, while you're having a small child that has cancer. And so I think, in particular, this center really highlighted that.

In addition to being able to connect with others through the program, connecting with hosts helped riders learn about other people's stories and see their generosity and support for a cause that affects so many.

One thing you don't appreciate is just people's generosity. We had families who just were like "oh you're those guys from you know from Texas riding to fight cancer," and we're like "yea." They're like, "well we saw you and we figured that you'd be here and we were just waiting, and by the way here's a bunch of popsicles." And you'd be like, "wow, that's cool." . . . The fact that you guys waited and gave us popsicles is pretty great too. Or entire families who just took us in. We had this one family . . . They didn't know who we were, and they were just like, "hey we heard that you guys were doing this. Why don't you come over?" And they hosted all twenty-something of us. They had a barbeque, and they gave us just incredible steaks. And, they let all of us take showers, in their shower. That's a lot of water, a lot of heat, and they just let us hang out and that was incredible and many different people did this and many different communities did this or churches did this or schools did this. (Rick, 2009 rider)

Emily (2004 rider) described the generosity of hosts, and how it helped the riders.

[The hosts] got into it; you'd pull up into a place, and they'd have their whole church community there . . . and they had so much food. And, kids brought their bikes for us to like look at. Because we'd figured out how to repair things. And so we fixed some kids bikes. And, it was definitely like they brought you into their community for a night and a

morning. And made you feel welcome, and even if you had a horrible day there was nothing like somebody just welcoming you and making you feel like what you're doing is amazing, and it would just push you into the next day. . . . It was pretty amazing what people do for people who don't know, who had no clue who we were before that.

Rick (2009 rider) summed it up by saying,

That was something that I always take with me is just generosity is something that I didn't really consider to be a virtue until I really joined the ride. And I was just like people are very selfless. And I think that's a really beautiful way to live—to help out people who need help.

In addition to learning about the generosity of others, riders were able to learn about how cancer affects others from hosts and others they met along the way. Carrie (2009 rider) said that they would be

going into a gas station and people would see your jersey and ask you about it and you'd tell them what you were riding for. And, somebody who was a stranger, listen two minutes, they'll be able to tell you all about like their mom or their sister or their wife or whomever who had had a friend or a family member who had struggled or died or beaten cancer and it was just a very transformational experience in that sense to see that people all over the country are really different but really the same when you think about it.

Eric (2013 rider) reiterated Carrie's statements that riders would learn that people all over the country are different but really the same:

Being able to visit with the hosts and being able to talk to them. . . . We would always talk to the hosts about why they wanted to host us. We would usually ride for whoever

they wanted to ride for. Because you find out that everyone has a personal connection to cancer, along the way. Its not just you it's everyone. . . . It just opens your eyes to how much more cancer affects everyone than you realized before. And after being in the organization for a year and a half, you know it affects everyone. You see everyone's stories in meetings and everyone has a personal story and everyone has friends who have personal stories and it's just everywhere. But you travel across the country and it's still everywhere. And you just get a greater sense of how it has a huge impact.

Many riders described specific hosts, and how this host had affected them individually. There were hosts in particular who were remembered by multiple riders and the teams were clearly very fond of:

Haley Smith, she still helps with Texas 4000 and she's an avid cyclist and a breast cancer survivor. . . . She told me her story about fighting cancer. It really made me appreciate every single day of my life and live it to the fullest, because I don't think I really did that before. And that was just such a weird eye opening experience to hear that come out of someone, "Oh that's the best thing that ever happened to me." But I think it's a life altering experience that makes you appreciate every day so much more. And I loved hearing about that from her and I remember I really started picking up on that theme.

(Abigail, 2008 rider)

In Fort Collins, Colorado, one host was a world-class weightlifter.

I've met [him] a couple times through Texas 4000 when they come through that he's been fighting pancreatic cancer for several years...he always had really touching stories for the teams, but I just found out that a couple weeks ago he passed away. So, stuff like

that then that really impacts you and makes you know you're doing something good for others. (Arthur, 2008 rider)

He'd broken world record, power lifting records months after recovering from Chemo. Which was incredible. . . . He was at MD Anderson, that's where he got treated, and the situation was so bad that they put him in the experimental section. And he survived, and he made it. And so, I remember he was telling this story, and when he got to the part, that you know, that the doctors had basically said, "Hey, you have a very low probability of surviving. Would you like to go to the experimental section?" And when he was detailing that moment, to us, I remember seeing his brother just bawling, I mean his brother was just a wreck. And I myself have a brother and so . . . I just remember that moment. I remember just thinking about my brother. Anyways, so I approached him afterwards, and I was like your story's incredible. I was like thank you for sharing, that's an incredible story and my dad works at MD Anderson so I brought that up. And he was like "I saw some people, I saw this one lady, they'd taken away her jaw because she was a smoker. And when I looked at her, I looked right into her eyes. I didn't look around. What I saw was something that was just terrible. But I looked right into their eyes, because the worst thing that you could do was take away someone's pride. There is nothing worse that you could do." And, that moment, I think more than anything else really sums up what the ride was for me. Cause what he said, that lesson is I think incredible and something that when you're younger you pick on people. And when you get older you realize that's bad. And for me that really drove that home. Too, it was the entire, well he broke power lifting

records when he was recovering from Chemo so I can't let like my stupid asthma or anything else prevent me from climbing, this hill. (Rick, 2009 rider)

Ellen has been hosting for many years and is a host that riders look forward to every year. Riders talked about her kindness and her passion for the cause and how they were able to connect with her.

One person that a lot of people would find memorable was Ellen in Prince George. She's a legendary Texas 4000 host. And she had a son that died of cancer. And she always, when we went there, showed a video about him and everyone was just bawling and she's very supportive of what we're doing. And I think meeting people like her really gave us a renewed sense of this is what we're doing. (Arthur, 2008 rider)

She is like a rock. She is in a part of Canada. She was just amazing and has a lot to do with a lot of local events. Her nephew [had cancer], but he passed away last year. It just reminded me of why I am here, to help the needs of other people, not to meet my needs. Listen to their stories and you know spread the word and that was just such an eye opening experience. (Abigail, 2008 rider)

She's like a mom to us and we just missed her nephew die of cancer; like he died a week before I got there. He was holding on to meet us because he'd met the previous team. It was just heartbreaking that we missed him. And she and I have stayed in contact on Facebook, my parents went and visited her. . . . She is a perfect example of what people did, the kindness of their hearts because the mission mattered to them. I mean a lot of

towns now do it really well. . . . But Ellen was more practical like “hey, I know you guys need this stuff so I've organized this restaurant outside town that will give you lunch on your way out of town, here take my car go shopping at Costco. Here's my Costco card, you know, take my daughter with you she'll show you around.”...she entertained us and she had the bike shop all lined up to do your parts for us. (Calvin, 2007 rider)

Another memorable host is Pastor John, who hosts the team on their last night. His kindness and story struck a chord for at least two of the riders. Jack (2012) rider had described his encounter with Pastor John as an inspiration for finishing the day (see pg. 103). Michael (2006 rider) also described his encounter with Pastor John:

I didn't realize he was the pastor for the longest time because he looked like some guy who just rode in on his Harley. He had a bandana, he had a shaved head, wore this leather jacket and all these chains. He was a big mean looking guy, but had the friendliest face. And it was a tough face, with a big old smile on it...he went by Pastor John, and we got to talking and he told us about how this town was where you go if you want to disappear. And, then he told us about some of the residents, they were all these people who, either the law wanted them, or they got back from Vietnam and never fully adjusted so they just went to Alaska. Or all these weird things. . . . Pastor John got involved [in the morning's ride dedication circle], he got in the circle and he asked us to ride for his wife Polly, who had died of breast cancer, between five and ten years ago. And, he cried like a baby. You could tell, he loved his wife so much, and this meant a lot to him...And, I remember also, that night we ran out of ice cream. And everyone had gotten some, but someone wanted

more, so he just got in his truck and drove down to the store just to buy some more ice cream, because you know this whole dinner he had put out for us wasn't enough.

Finishing the Ride

Two major milestones—meeting back up with the other routes and the end of the ride, marked the last ten days. Meeting back up with the other routes caused a lot of tension among the riders, as they had to adjust to different routines and teammates they had not seen in awhile. As the end of the ride neared, riders increasingly felt sadness about having to end their journey. The different routes had left Austin as one team, but “as it went on it became a competition between the two [routes]” (Anthony, 2009 rider). Calvin (2007 rider) said,

There [was] definitely something like active animosity. . . that was a real challenge when we met back up in Whitehorse to kind of heal the rivalry into a bond because we were all like, “Hey. We did this thing.” But like “Oh. You guys have been eating steak all the time we've been eating rice and beans. What the fuck? This is not fair.” and kind of trying to get past that as an individual and a part of my group, it was really, really challenging.

We were pretty good until we met up with Rockies in White Horse and then that was bad because, and this is a traditional struggle for Texas 4000, you have two very different routes that meet up together in one place, and when they meet up they have different ways of managing themselves, different expectations, and just different personalities. (Jenny, 2010 rider)

Riders were excited to meet back up with the other team, but difficulties arose and tempered that excitement.

The final ten days of the ride, as exciting as it was to meet up with the other ride, it was also an interesting dynamic because they still felt like a different group. And in some ways there were times where we kind of wished that we had just remained in our Rockies group because we developed these tight relationships. And it kind of felt like too much to bring another group with a whole different style into the mix. (Will, 2006 rider)

You're all excited to meet the other team. But there's still apprehension because you've been close with this one group of people. You don't really want to mingle with this other group of people. . . . The two teams were together, but separate. When they met up, you would do things, you would come together and everything. But it would still kind of segregate. And even when we were riding, we rode separately. (Arthur, 2008 rider)

Overall meeting back up with the caused tension between the routes because of the different ways of operating and functioning. Marcus (2012 rider) and Judy (2009 rider) described the differences that affected how the routes came back together.

Before the ride, we're all one team. And then during the summer, it becomes two teams that have different summers. And at the end, we come together again to finish. But having different routes makes leadership styles different. It makes people go different and it makes separation happen, but that's a natural thing because we have two or three different routes. (Marcus, 2012 rider)

They just seemed a lot serious, and I know that they bonded in their own way. But it was not as relaxed as Rockies had it. And I think that primarily has to do with the fact that

Sierra had so much contact with the outside world. Cause they went through a lot bigger towns and had stayed with a lot more hosts than Rockies did, whereas Rockies camped out a lot, and stayed in the National Parks, and so there were days where we didn't really see anyone else and if we did, it was at a campground where we talked to them, or at random rest stops or when we stopped at a store that we would encounter along the way. So, I think that made us sort of have to get to know each other, and get along a lot better. And I don't know if they had that opportunity to do that. . . . And then transitioning into both of our styles and our habits having to come together and work out because we still had ten days to go. So, that was interesting. It was a little difficult. (Judy, 2009 rider)

In addition to the tension of meeting back up, the last ten days of the ride were marked by a variety of emotions—from the joy of accomplishing so much to the fear of having to go back to the real world. Steven (2008 rider) described it as “bittersweet because I was very glad to be off and at the same time I didn't want it to be over.”

For some riders, the end of the ride brought about a range of negative emotions. Anthony (2009 rider) said, “we finally got to the Alaska border, after then for me, it was when it got like homesick type thing.” Rachel (2012 rider) described,

A point around Day 67 where and me and a few of the other girls were like “we're over this, we've been riding for 60 days, we've pretty much proven our point.” . . . But I think biking got really old...and I'm not a cyclist and it hurt, my body hurt, I had knee problems and so I think the biking was terrible.

Arthur (2008 rider) was ready to get to Alaska for different reasons:

I remember specifically feeling pretty excited to be done with the whole thing, from Yukon onwards. I was getting over it. People started to annoy me cause you've been with them for 70 days. And you know things that wouldn't annoy you, if you were just hanging out with them for a little bit, started to get on your nerves a little bit more. And, I was just tired of the whole ride, it's a long ride. So I was excited to be done. But then when you're actually finished, you're like, "Oh, its over." And you wish it kept on going.

Thomas (2009 rider) wasn't excited for the ride to end. Over the last few days,

I spent a lot of time thinking about why I was there, why I had come, what I was doing, trying to figure out what had just happened, or what was still happening. And right near the end of the ride—I could go home now. I'm fine with the idea of this ending. And, I felt I needed to figure out what I had done.

Others weren't ready for the ride to end. Diane (2009 rider) wasn't ready to leave her teammates. "It's such a mix of emotions because you're elated that you've made it this far, but it does mean that the ride is ending," she said. "And it's this realization that I'm not going to be living with these people every day, I'm not going to get to see these people every day." Anna (2013 rider) had been injured for much of the summer, and felt that she just wanted more time to ride and spend time with her teammates and hosts.

I loved being able to go to hosts and see them crying and telling us how amazing we were. I loved getting all these amazing food donations given to us for free. I loved making connections with my teammates. I just wanted so much more time especially because the last ten days. I wanted more time to ride with people that I hadn't talked to over the summer. I wanted to be able to talk to Sierra and Rockies, and so the last ten

days were a lot of coming to terms with the fact that it was going to be over. . . . It was a lot of fear and excitement . . . fear for the fact that the journey was ending and I didn't know how I was going to go into the world and impart the knowledge and the passion that I gained through my experience on my endeavors thereafter. But also excitement to be able to finally engage with other people and tell them about my summer, and try to awaken some sort of energy for life.

DISCUSSION OF THE EXPERIENCE

The many activities and requirements of Texas 4000 allowed participants to meet and build relationships with others, find meaning, purpose, and inspiration in the fight against cancer, and challenge themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally. The nature of the organization allowed for an extraordinary experience by allowing participants to experience a sense of newness, high levels of emotional intensity, interpersonal interactions, and personal growth. The interpersonal interactions, sense of newness, and personal growth were all influenced by participants' previous experiences and reasons for joining the organization.

Interpersonal Relationships

Even though most riders did not list meeting others as a main reason for joining the organization, it is clear that interpersonal interactions were prevalent from the day that participants joined to long after the ride. Meeting others allowed riders to hear and share personal stories, which they were able to internalize and use to broaden their sense of self. The nature of the ride also allowed participants to build strong relationships with other riders—something that many were not looking for, but ultimately were beneficial to students.

Riders met many other individuals throughout their time in the organization. They had to arrange hosts along the ride, set up programs, contact hospitals, solicit businesses, fundraise, and volunteer. This put them in direct contact with many individuals outside the organization. Even the simple act of wearing a jersey out on a ride was enough to spark conversation with others. They could be short, quick conversations that lasted a few minutes at a rest stop or hours-long conversations. The focus of most of these interactions revolved around cancer, but not all.

Meeting and learning from hosts had the most profound impact on participants, as many riders expressed incredulity at the generosity of the hosts, and learned, as they got further along on their journey, that cancer has affected many people—in ways different than their own. Hosts would often discuss how cancer had affected them personally—through their own cancer journey or a loved one’s battle. Participants felt that hearing these stories were eye-opening experiences. Many talked about how emotional they were, often breaking down into tears upon hearing how someone’s battle with cancer was going. They learned lessons from others’ experiences, such as how taking away someone’s pride affects them or that you should appreciate everyday of life and cancer can help you realize that. Interacting with hosts also helped participants realize that they were doing good for others by sharing their own stories, giving programs, and generally spreading the word about the fight on cancer. Finally, hearing the stories and seeing the generosity of others inspired dedication to the cause beyond participation in the organization.

Beyond learning from hosts, participants brief interactions with others during panhandling or soliciting support or sponsorship from businesses allowed participants to see the generosity of others and to hear more stories of cancer having an impact on others. Talking with individuals at volunteering events or while bicycling also allowed participants to see how

prevalent cancer was and how people wanted to share their own stories. The cause became a universal connection to others.

Through these interactions with others outside the organization, participants had to shift their perspective because old assumptions were made clear, as Mezirow (1978) describes. The assumption that cancer affected only participants was broadened as riders realized that cancer didn't affect just themselves, their families, Texas 4000, or their community. It was a problem that affects so many individuals across the country (and world even), as participants learned through meeting and interacting with others. This shift in perspective then had an influence on individuals through the lessons they learned from these individuals—something that they could carry on into their lives after the ride. Their priorities shifted, as will be described later.

Life-long relationships were built with other Texas 4000 riders. Participants were able to first meet others in the organization at the new rider picnic held to welcome students into the organization. They were able to talk to alumni and other riders on their team, and learn more about the upcoming experience. Throughout the year they were able to get to know a few riders intimately through volunteering and cycling together. Although, many riders described how they still didn't know very many of their teammates by the time they left for the ride. This changed very quickly, as on the ride “you're just around each other 24/7. So you can't help but make really awesome friendships” (Jack, 2012 rider). Particularly on the bike because there was only so much small talk one could make while on a bike with twenty other people for eight hours a day for seventy days. Riders quickly became comfortable with each other and talked about topics that they wouldn't talk about in normal conversations.

In particular, those who had direct connections to cancer used this opportunity to open up and share stories about their experiences that they had never talked about before. Those who had lost parents, in particular, found that they were comfortable talking about that experience with their teammates. There was a level of trust with their teammates that they hadn't found elsewhere—even among their family members.

These riders imparted a new perspective on their teammates—teammates who expressed that they felt like imposters on the ride because they didn't have a direct experience with cancer. However, those who did told the riders who felt like imposters that they were inspiring for raising the money and spreading awareness without a clear reason to do so. So, in addition to being therapeutic for riders with similar experiences, sharing these stories also allowed others to consider new perspectives and integrate it into their current perspective.

Even for riders who weren't necessarily looking to meet new people, their teammates became like family. They had to rely on each other and help each other throughout the ride. From supporting the team through SAG, to helping others who were struggling, to providing entertainment and emotional support as necessary, riders had not one else to rely on. Riders had a sense of purpose and belonging in the group—even those who thought they wouldn't belong at the beginning. Similar to Arnould and Price's (1993) description of the creation of *communitas* through an extraordinary experience, the riders relied on teamwork to get ready in the morning, to SAG, and to ride. They developed their own norms on the ride (e.g. how rest stops were set up), and shared group experiences and challenges (such as “the infamous day thirteen”). Having a shared purpose too was instrumental as riders were all working towards the same goal—to fight cancer.

However, different routes formed this sense of *communitas* with each other, and not with the other routes. Each route forms its own norms and has its own challenges and experiences that contribute to the sense of community. This led to a sense of rivalry among the routes, despite a shared purpose to spread “hope, knowledge, and charity” and similar activities. This rivalry affected the last ten days of the ride, as meeting up with the other route and adapting between the two routes was stressful and difficult. Even those who had made friends on other routes during the year discussed how difficult it was to connect with those friends because they had different stories to tell and different experiences.

The friendships and sense of community built through the ride and extraordinary experience were not as strong before the 70-day journey. Essentially being forced to work together and rely on each other was necessary to start the process of building a community. Having a shared purpose and working together to plan the ride, volunteer, and train was not enough as not all teammates attended all events or events didn’t allow for much interaction. Riders also had the ability to return to their already established networks to fulfill their needs—something that was nearly impossible to do on the ride due to lack of cell service and inability for the established networks to understand the challenges and experiences of riders during the ride.

Interpersonal interactions were clearly prominent throughout the experience—from brief interactions with hosts and other community members to the intense relationships built between riders. These interactions may have happened without the experience, but it is clear that they would not have been able to freely share stories about personal experiences with cancer or build

the trust necessary to do so. From these interactions participants were able to consider other perspectives and choose how to integrate them into their everyday lives after the ride.

Finding Meaning and Purpose through Cancer

As was prevalent in many participants' backgrounds, cancer was prominent throughout participation. Almost every aspect of participating involved talking about or relating to cancer—even seemingly unrelated things like volunteering at a non-cancer related event, training, or cycling on the ride. Some participants complained that these things were not focused on the mission, but many found that they were able to talk to others because of the jersey they were wearing or were able to use the fight against cancer as an inspiration for challenging days.

Being able to interact with others and hear their experiences with cancer allowed many participants to put things in perspective. Hearing from hosts and teammates gave participants more information to help them adjust their perspective. Visiting hospitals and cancer clinics also allowed participants to see the fight in person. As mentioned previously, participants learned lessons such as appreciating every day life or taking away someone's pride is the worst thing to do. Cancer became something bigger than themselves—it affected others, and in ways that were different than their own experience. As they realized this, they became a part of the larger “cancer community,” or built stronger ties to this community, because they realized that cancer affected everybody.

Having learned from their teammates and others they met along the way, participants were able to learn more about cancer and its prevalence. They were able to consider other's perspectives and adjust their own—which resulted in feeling a part of something bigger than

themselves because cancer affected more than just themselves. They became more connected to this “cancer community.”

Cancer also gave meaning and purpose to the ride. Several participants felt that their teams lost focus, or that it was easy to lose sight of what they were riding for. Daily reminders like the ride dedication circles helped bring focus back why riders were there. Other less frequent things like hospital visits also helped riders actually see the cancer fight in action, which provided a strong reminder of the purpose of the ride—to help end the suffering and fight to find a cure.

The nature of the ride, however, made it easy to lose sight for some riders and teams. It became an adventure or cool vacation for these—to the irritation of others. Several contributing factors to this tension between the adventure and cause include the motivation of participants to join the organization as well as leadership. Michael (2006 rider) was one individual who described this tension and how it irritated him, but Michael rode in the early years of the organization, where the struggle to plan and take care of logistics took resources away from the ability to focus on the cause. In later years, several riders pointed out that much of the logistics had been taken care of with previous teams, more sponsors were on board, and there were Executive Directors and one other employee who helped alleviate the need for the team to focus on the cause. Those motivated by adventure also took advantage of the trip to enjoy the ride and without leadership to pull the focus back to the cause, there was some tension between the desire to have an adventure and the desire to help the cause.

The sense of purpose tied to the cause supports earlier findings that charity sport events can serve as a way to make a difference in the world (Filo et al., 2009). Many individuals felt

that they never would have taken on such a big challenge if it hadn't been for the cause and its ability to help them honor loved ones or contribute to a cure for cancer. This purpose also helped them feel like they were a part of something bigger than themselves; something that was so important that they continued to want this feeling after the ride was over. However, the physical activity sometimes took away from this purpose. Activities to refocus the ride and remind the riders of the bigger purpose of the ride were important in unifying the team and giving meaning to what they were doing.

This purpose and the daily reminders also served as inspiration throughout the ride. Riders discussed how on particularly difficult days they would think back to how loved ones had fought, the hosts who were so generous or had described fights with cancer, and the hospital visits in which people were still fighting. They realized that their difficult day, then, was nothing in comparison, and if those who were suffering were still fighting then they could continue to ride their bike. The meaning and purpose behind the ride inspired students to do more than they thought they could.

This inspiration served as a motivating factor for challenging themselves. The inspiration was evoked from outside of sport, but were still applicable to and motivating in regards to, sporting challenges. It allowed participants to transcend their ordinary limits (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). This completion of these challenging days and ability to go beyond what was thought possible boosted participants' sense of empowerment and led them to believe they can do anything, as will be discussed later. The crossover of inspiration from cause to sport is unusual as previous research had indicated that inspiration derived from a cause had no carryover to sport behaviors (Lim, Rundio & Green, 2011). However, it is likely that the direct interaction at

hospitals and connections with hosts proved to be stronger inspiration with a clearer link to the cause than at other events in which participants attend the sporting event and have limited exposure to the cause and no indication of the applicability of the cause-related inspiration to their own sport behaviors outside the event.

Challenges

Inspiration helped individuals overcome some challenges, but throughout the journey, riders faced a variety of challenges. Physical challenges such as long distances or tall mountains and injuries, interpersonal challenges such as leadership and teammate disagreements, and emotional and mental challenges such as overcoming injury and dealing with self-doubt. However, throughout the ride, riders talked about being able to overcome these challenges through perseverance, dedication, and patience.

Learning how to ride a bike and getting in shape for a cross-country ride presented physical challenges for many—including those who had not ridden a bike since they were children or did not consider themselves athletic. On the ride, challenges included days set aside for challenges (such as the three-days-in-one or the climb of the highest paved American road), but also regular days that included climbing mountains or biking more miles than normal. Weather often made things difficult physically, and injuries made it impossible for some to actually ride their bikes the entire way.

As mentioned previously, inspiration was one way that riders dealt with these challenges. However, teammates' support also proved instrumental in helping individuals overcome these challenges. Learning to ride with others who had no experience on a bicycle and practicing with them provided riders with a safe environment that made them feel comfortable in an unfamiliar

situation and provided riders with a support system. This support system was also instrumental on the ride as students would often slow down or block the wind for those who were struggling. Riders mentioned that they wouldn't have made it to Alaska if not for their teammates—and a small part of that was the support on the bicycle that riders gave to each other.

The physical challenges also helped fulfill riders' desire for adventure. Through biking up tall mountains and across states riders were able to see new things and learn about themselves, both things they had mentioned as part of their desire for adventure. They described beautiful rides in National Parks, desolate deserts, and tall mountains that widened their understanding of America (and Canada) and allowed them to connect with nature. They also were able to learn how much they could achieve—which also contributed to the feeling that riders could do anything. Here, riders recognized their own assumptions about their limits and had to adjust them after being able to complete something they physically were unsure they could complete. This is just one piece of the personal transformation process (Mezirow, 1978). But without the opportunities that allowed participants to learn new skills, master these skills, and a chance to overcome challenges, as provided by this and other extraordinary experiences (Arnould & Price, 1993), this personal transformation would not have happened.

Interpersonal challenges presented an opportunity to learn how to work with others and understand their perspectives. However, this opportunity was not always seized, as many described times in which differences could not be overcome. Differences in leadership styles were apparent, but one prevalent interpersonal challenge was the rivalry between routes. The fusion of two (or three) different routes with their own norms was difficult, and there was not enough time or impetus for riders to overcome these differences as the ride came to an end.

Despite the opportunity to consider others perspectives and use it to adjust their own, in this case it was difficult. Participants wanted to stick to their routines and norms and had a hard time adjusting. They had built trust within their own groups, and due to the different group experiences it was hard to extend this trust beyond the riders on their route.

Others described mental and emotional challenges throughout their experience. Things like weather, other people, and injuries provided not just physical or interpersonal challenges but an internal struggle as well. Weather made some rides difficult and dampened riders' spirits, as did injuries. Those with injuries on the ride either adapted by doing what they could (such as riding a few miles and walking the rest of the way) or had to adjust to SAGging. However, not being able to complete the ride as expected wore on riders, who realized that not every fight was physical, but some were mental and emotional struggles as is the case. Tying this struggle to be supportive while dealing with disappointment to the greater purpose and meaning of the ride allowed riders to overcome their disappointment. Physical challenges also had an emotional element to them, and during training some riders struggled with the idea of how they would make it to Alaska when they were struggling with shorter training rides. And dealing with people all the time, while forcing riders to rely on each other, also caused some people to be overwhelmed by the different personalities and being surrounded by them at all times.

Again, though, these challenges allowed participants to adjust their long-held perspectives and learn more about themselves. They overcame the various emotional challenges in various ways, but each way required adapting to the new situation and changing their perspective on how to deal with it. For some this involved doing something differently, for others this meant finding meaning and purpose, and for others this meant adjusting their attitude.

Regardless, they learned that they had to and could change to overcome the emotional challenges presented during the ride.

Although the challenges varied wildly for each rider, without the opportunities provided by the preparation of the ride and the extraordinary experience of the ride participants would not have been able to learn more about themselves and others. And without this knowledge, personal transformations could not occur. Challenges and the ability to overcome these challenges, then, become a key factor in the types of impacts that participants perceived.

Interpersonal relationships, cancer, and challenges were all intertwined throughout the experience. Interpersonal relationships allowed individuals to learn about others and their experience with cancer, cancer provided meaning and inspiration to overcome challenges, and challenges affected interpersonal relationships. However, the ability to allow riders to learn about themselves and others and to adjust their own perspectives was common among all three and impacted the personal transformations that individuals perceived.

Chapter Six: Impacts

Completing the ride had both immediate and long-lasting impacts on the riders. Upon arriving back in Austin, Texas, many individuals expressed having a difficult time adjusting to everyday life, and some even became depressed—a phenomenon so widespread among riders that it has been termed Post-T4K Depression among the team members. Riders also reported feeling that they could do anything they set their mind to and were inspired by a mantra that has been passed down to not let Texas 4000 be the best thing they ever did. Alumni have also cherished the relationships they built through participation. Building lifelong friendships among teammates, finding significant others, and creating new bonds with hosts affected many of the riders. Some fell in love with being physically active and others with charitable work—a passion they continued to pursue long after the ride was over. The impact of participating in the ride looked different in all alumni, but all alumni felt some impact. As Will (2006 rider) explained, “the ride definitely had a lot of big impacts on my life. And, arguably has impacted me, almost everything in my life.”

Feelings of Empowerment

Completing the ride to Alaska brought about feelings of being able to do anything—feelings that lasted for many years and affected many aspects of participants lives. “Texas 4000 made me realize it’s okay to take chances, it’s okay to fail, it’s okay to think that you can achieve crazy things of an astounding scale. It’s okay to take the road less traveled, have adventures,” said Diane (2009 rider). The physical act of biking to Alaska made it seem that anything is possible for the riders, as explained in the following quotes:

I have this overwhelming feeling that like anything is possible after Texas 4000. It's just really hard to walk away from an experience where you and all of these other kids who have a similar background to you and were in school three months prior and then all of a sudden you find encouragement, there's all your family and then you look around at your teammates and you realize that you literally just biked there from Austin and it feels like you can do anything . . . anything is possible. (Sydney, 2013 rider)

Physically I feel like I'm capable of anything. I'm going to be running a marathon in December, and I wasn't a runner before Texas 4000. I feel this necessity to be active; that's not just physically but like not just in sports, but also, in other organizations. . . . I think that everything is possible and I don't think any dream is too big. I know that I want to spend the rest of my life helping other people, but that had been the case beforehand. But now, I think that I can help other people through incredible, imaginative projects that I want to do. I want to start my own organizations, and . . . I have this desire to create a better world, not only through the structures and organizations that already exist but through creating new values for this world, and new ideas, new organizations. Texas 4000 gave me that passion, drive, and, and belief that I can do it. (Anna, 2013 rider)

Texas 4000 gave me a lot of things. A sense that I could—that physically I had no limits. That I could do whatever I wanted, if I just tried hard enough. And I think that has been very helpful to me, just in general in life. . . . I think it also gave me this, [sense that] I

could work with anybody. After that experience I really felt I could live with, I could work with any kind of personality. (Jenny, 2010 rider)

That stuck around with me, this idea that I have this huge capacity, if I want to reach for it. And it doesn't just apply physically, but mentally as well. Career-wise, interpersonally, my friendships—every person has all of this untapped potential. (Marshall, 2008 rider)

For me it kind of had the impact that you can do more than you think you can do type thing. I think that was the biggest impact it had for me. Before long, it became pretty [clear], Texas 4000 wasn't about being really good, it was basically about enduring everything which was a parallel to enduring cancer treatment type things. It's not about how fast you can get there, it's "can you keep going when you don't want to keep going." I think that's what it taught me. (Anthony, 2009 rider)

I could physically challenge myself and think "Wow, I can't go anymore" and still be able to do it, that that could be translated to other areas of my life, like even when things are not going the way you want them to or you have some hurdles along the road, you can find a different road to get there, you can actually make that happen, and make it happen for yourself, and for others. And that anything really is possible if you work. You can make things happen. I think that was the biggest lessons, if I could overcome that, if I was able to finish that then there's a lot more things that I could accomplish. It doesn't have to be my greatest achievement. A 2008 rider once told us, told the 2009 team, like

“don’t let this be like the biggest that you do in life. Go out and use it as a vehicle to do other great things, see what else you can accomplish,” and I think that really stuck with me. (Judy, 2009 rider).

For many, the physical challenges of the ride applied specifically to the feelings of physical empowerment. Michael (2006 rider) said completing Texas 4000 led to his pursuit of physical challenges:

It did make me realize that, because a lot of people when you say “You know, I rode a bike to Alaska,” they kind of go “No, you didn’t,” or “That’s impossible,” or “You’re crazy.” And it made me realize that all those things that most people would think you can’t do that, yea you can. Why not? And so, it was a little bit of a change in outlook on certain things . . . I got back, and I thought, “Well let’s run another marathon. And let’s see how I do, now that I’ve done this Texas 4000 thing.” And my time improved so much, on my second ever marathon I qualified for Boston. And, after that, I go, “I can do anything.” And, so it’s always been just one, every time I finish a challenge I go what can I do next. . . . I’ve just kind of always been like that since then. It’s that your limits are farther than you ever would’ve imagined if you’re willing to get uncomfortable . . . its just a general attitude that if I want to do something, its just a matter of doing something. And I’m convinced that’s just not me, I’m convinced just about everyone can do all the things I do, it’s not that people can or can’t, its that people do or don’t.

Arthur (2008 rider) also described a similar penchant for pursuing physical challenges:

I think it gave me the idea that I can do anything I want. Like I said before that, I wasn’t an adventurous guy. I wasn’t active. I wasn’t athletic. I was a normal kid going to school,

playing in the marching band. But then afterwards I felt like . . . I've always had like these goals I wanted to do in the back of my mind. Cycling was always a goal I've wanted to do since high school. But never had anything to really push me to it, but Texas 4000 did. And afterwards, I think it made me less hesitant about pursuing my goals. So, one goal I had after I got back was triathlons actually. And I could not swim for crap. And I still can't swim. But I wasn't as scared to try new things. And be more adventurous. And know that if I want to do something I can do it. So I think that was a big turning point in my life.

Rachel (2012 rider) briefly expressed, “Now I have this like, this like, drive to continue to do great things, and to continue to stay in shape. . . . I've been running a marathon and like running a relay and doing all these things.” Emily (2004 rider) also stayed involved in other physical activities:

So I did this, and it was like I'm physically capable of doing . . . I can do this . . . I'm more active now than I probably would've ever been, had I not done the ride. It put me at such a level of physical fitness that I maintained, even through an ACL tear. But I swam a lot, and I biked a lot. I didn't run much, but I was able to run a sub 2-hour half-marathon, you know just based on that.

New Perspectives and Appreciations

Seeing the generosity of others and hearing their stories gave many riders a sense of gratefulness and appreciation. Many participants, though, had a hard time articulating exactly what that personal growth was—they just knew that they had been changed. Sydney (2013 rider) explained,

I absolutely changed. I think first and foremost it's given me this incredible amount of perspective on things and a sense of gratefulness, which is—I think it's hard to live your daily life and be grateful for things. But when you hear people who have lost their parents or their spouse or somebody else who is truly close to them, every single day repeatedly for two and a half months, it's really, really hard to walk away from that not being grateful for what you have, even though you've lost somebody too. And it just makes you grateful, and I think just riding that much everyday leaves your grateful for like your body and your youth. And I think most importantly I walked away with this incredible sense of gratitude so that I try to carry into my daily life now...I don't even know if I can describe it. It's definitely a life-changing event. . . . Actually I looked at a picture of myself today from when I visited Washington DC in March. And I looked at that picture and the thought crossed my mind, “wow that was before I did Texas 4000,” and it's just this before and after switch, that's the best way to put it. And after it's just that I care so deeply about cancer and cancer research.

Rick (2009 rider) added,

And then you ask some people. How, what can we do to repay you. And they'd just be like pay it forward. And I thought that that was something, I mean that was something that I always kind of take with me is just generosity is something that I didn't really consider to be a virtue until I really joined the ride. And I was just like man people are very selfless. And I think that's really kind of beautiful way to live. Is to help out people who need help. And so there was . . . the idea of paying it forward. Just the idea of generosity, really kind of internalizing those lessons.

For Abigail (2008 rider), seeing others generosity was something she hadn't ever experienced before.

I just never viewed how generous people can be. People who didn't really have a whole lot but gave so much, and they felt so honored to host us that we didn't feel like a chore to them, which amazed me. They didn't have a whole lot but they were like this is a way that we can have an impact to be here for the whole human purpose and how we can fight cancer. We're not able to give \$10,000 but we're able to host you and help raise hope with you and help raise charity with you, even if we're only able to put a roof over your head. So, it was just wonderful and I felt like, being an anthropologist especially, I felt just like it was so unique being different like cultural experiences you know that I hadn't been in before. You really got to, you know people invite you into their homes, without questioning anything. It was, I mean you can just see that to learn so much about people.

Abigail also described how the ride gave her perspective. Something echoed by others.

One of the hosts that Abigail stayed with told her,

"Cancer is the best thing that ever happened to me." . . . She's changed my life, She had a lot of impact on my life. . . . I think that I've always been a little bit optimistic. When I had my bike accident, so then I didn't appreciate everything as much as I could have. I try to really live by that and make each day count. Don't waste a day.

Carolyn (2012 rider) described how the perspective she gained manifests itself in her life now:

I would say the impact is perspective really. Things that might have bothered me on a day in the past, while it seems trivial, like just working through a problem at work or something like that. Where in the past it would drive me nuts, I actually take the time to

figure it out. Now it's just trivial but you know I just work at or I get the resources, but it's...perspective I guess is the best way I can describe it. You have a different perspective on problems and life in general I mean.

Francie (2010 rider) explained that her growth included not taking anything for granted, and appreciating everything:

It gave me so much growth and I probably even still don't understand it today, but I want to do so many different things that I have a new found passion for. . . . I am just so much appreciative of the world and everybody and everything that's good in it, and I just never thought about life that way before. . . . I'm a completely different person now and I hope it's for the better. I like vegetables now, I can eat with my food touching, I love the outdoors, I am open minded and have a sense of charity that I don't think I ever really felt that passionate; passionate about wanting to live. I mean not wanting to take it for granted. I don't think I ever felt that before Texas 4000.

Several took this sense of appreciation for their abilities, that they had developed through overcoming challenges and feeling empowered, and applied it to physical endeavors. Michael (2006 rider) went into detail to describe his athletic endeavors:

It did awaken what is now probably my greatest passion. Before that . . . I liked being outside and stuff, but I wasn't really an athlete or anything, and its weird how some people react to it differently. Some people get back and they don't want to see spandex ever again. . . . Most people weren't cyclists when they signed up, and it becomes like a kind of a casual interest that they absorb. For me, I got hooked. Not necessarily on cycling specifically, but on long distance. I now own nine marathon and ultramarathon

course records...I'm a long distance athlete now, that's my thing. I've gone on three self-supported tours since then. One of which was actually much harder than Texas 4000. That's kind of become my thing. Another guy on the Rockies route, similar reaction, only his was very cycling specific, and he made an attempt to go around the world by bike and would've done it, only he made it about two-thirds of the way, and the country he was in, went to war while he was there. And just sent him home . . . it awakened something that I would've never known that I loved this so much. I guess that I owe that to Texas 4000. It changed me for the better . . . I started biking everywhere. I bike more than I drive, a lot more.

Jenny (2010 rider) said she still bikes, mainly to commute, but has switched focus on running for fitness:

I actually still bike too. My biking is more of a commuting activity these days because of grad school. It would be more, uh, if I wasn't in grad school. So I commute to and from school . . . I really took to running for some reason. I really liked it. . . . But I love running, like something about it. I really don't know what it is like I feel like for me, what I really like about it is that you can do it quickly. Like 30 minutes and you can really get in, what I consider to be a good chunk of exercise. Whereas I feel like 30 minutes of anything else is just like, I don't feel like I've worked hard enough or whatever. And then I also just like the feeling. I like being able to think for thirty minutes while I'm doing something and not have to like concentrate too much on it. And I like running past things and looking at things. I don't like running inside at all. So I would

always prefer to run outside. But I don't know, I kept doing both of them because I enjoy them, I guess that's the best answer.

“It was definitely a life-changing experience. Before Texas 4000 I wasn't that adventurous . . . a lot of the experiences we had on the way were totally new to me” said Arthur, 2008 rider. He added,

Texas 4000 was the thing that pushed me to be athletic and to train for something. . . . So it taught me how to motivate myself, how to make a training plan and stick through it, and accomplish goals like triathlon or whatever. And so afterwards, yea, I started doing triathlons . . . I got into that, just like pushing myself further and further, and that I don't think I would've done without Texas 4000.

Francie (2010 rider) explained she discovered “the love of being on the bike in the middle of nowhere and just so loving, just being on the bike. I think that's something I didn't have, I didn't have that before I knew that.” Further, she expressed “I wasn't really a cyclist before. I wish I would have, because I really like it, it's really a lot of fun. I mean from giving me the bike, to instilling a love for cycling, they probably did everything.” However, because of where she lives she no longer rides.

Carrie (2009 rider) remained involved in supporting cancer-related causes, “Actually Texas 4000 is part of the reason I got accepted to climb Kilimanjaro last year for cancer with the Livestrong Foundation. Which is another big, fundraising challenge and physical challenge and everything else.” Thomas (2009 rider) and Calvin (2007 rider) expressed that they took the sense of responsibility and shift in perception to other causes in their community:

It changed my self perception a little bit along the lines of being the kind of person who contributes to charities how gets more involved with things like that. Now that I'm back, I'm one of the alumni leads for Austin, so I'm trying to stay involved if I can. I'm more charitable generally, than I think I was before, not even just with cancer charities but with other charities too. It's hard to do something so big and so involved and then not, not then think of yourself as the kind of person who that matters to. I mean and it does, right. . . But I feel like it's not something that I would have come around to, to the degree that I have had I not done the ride. (Thomas, 2009 rider)

I took that onto my life afterwards to a great extent, I moved to Portland and got involved in a few communities that really needed strong volunteers, and a lot of stuff I do today was inspired by like "hey, I'm not necessarily a politician like everybody else is calling me but I am a person who if he starts digging a trench and the people come to dig a trench next to him." And just kind of having that faith like it happened before, maybe it'll happen again. (Calvin, 2007 rider)

Meaning and Purpose after the Ride

In addition to feeling that they could do anything, many participants felt a sense of duty to not let "this be the biggest thing you do," as Judy (2009 rider) stated earlier. Diane (2009 rider) said that her group started "the typical Texas 4000 line...don't let this be your greatest adventure." Their lives after Texas 4000 have a purpose and meaning, and they continue to do things to help themselves and others. One of the rider's girlfriends was visiting on the last day, and Diane said:

When we did our final circle, she said, “Don’t let this be your greatest adventure.” And I remember it stood out to me, because she wasn’t always as supportive of the ride because she missed her boyfriend obviously and what not. And she wasn’t a rider, so for her to really get it like that, I was really impressed. That’s a really good point. Because how are we going to say that our greatest adventure was at 22 years old, right. That’s really sucky, the rest of life isn’t much to look forward to. And I mean two of them have climbed Kilimanjaro, one of them has done some equal things—I can’t even, she did this wilderness thing in New York for a semester, and now she’s going to medical school, and she went and did some graduate studies work in the arctic. . . . Robin’s doing teach for America, Matt is a Rhodes Scholar in Mexico, and for me it was so cool that I’m friends with these people that are just so smart and talented and well rounded and constantly inspiring me to be a better person.

Carrie (2009 rider) reiterated that someone’s girlfriend had said it, and described the same ride dedication circle:

All of us were sitting there like completely bummed out that our ride was ending and [this person was] like don’t let this be the last great thing that you do. And that’s just something that sticks with me, and I think is something that I can, console others with when I was mentoring 2013 riders. Just letting them know you’re going to do lots of other really amazing things—it doesn’t have to end here.

Rachel (2012 rider) expanded on this by describing what that saying meant to her:

[An] alumni at one point during our year told us to not let Texas 4000 be the greatest thing that we ever did. And I think that stuck with a lot of us, we reference that a lot, and

it's hard to continue to seek great opportunities but I think it's instilled in me that passion, drive for adventure that I didn't have before. So that I can continue to be like how can I better myself, how can I better society, what can I do for others, what can I do to empower myself to help others and I thought I was a good person before, but now I really feel like I have instilled in me this flame of doing.

Jack (2012 rider) explained that he used the saying as motivation to not dwell on Texas 4000:

There's a saying that gets passed around a lot, that says don't let Texas 4000 be the best thing you ever do. So don't let that be the high point of your life. Use that to motivate you to do something other cool things. . . . For me, it more means don't put Texas 4000 up on this pedestal of like, "oh this was amazing, and I'll never be able to do something cooler or better than that ever in my life." . . . Not worry about is the stuff I'm going to do now as good as that or as cool or as fun. Because I know I'll have plenty of amazing experiences, so I'm not worried or I'm not hung up on T4K. Which is how I would describe what it means to me.

For many, this sense of purpose to not let this be the greatest thing they ever did and give back, carried over into school or career paths. For some it was a slight change in paths, for others it was a drastic shift. For Carrie (2009 rider) the experience allowed her to think through what she wanted to do afterwards and how she could continue to do meaningful things:

During the ride, I just was thinking about things that really interested me, and things that I would have to come back to. And you have a whole lot of time to think when you're on your bike, for thirteen hours a day. So, I kind of thought then that I would want to get into non-profit experience and I wanted to do . . . some meaningful active things that I could

continue to do as well. And apparently I was pretty decent at fundraising, which I hadn't expected. And, so I came back from the ride, changed my thesis topic completely to something that was kind of abstract but that I knew would work. . . . I started volunteering with Texas 4000 afterwards—interviewing people and interviewing the next riders, and putting on a breakfast for the next teams. And just, volunteering my time. And as a result of that I ended up in development, which is what I do now. So I fundraise for a living, and I still volunteer with Texas 4000 as much as I can. . . . Texas 4000 really changed my career trajectory in a way, but also just my gauge for what's personally meaningful.

Jenny (2010 rider) shared similar sentiments about wanting to help others in a meaningful way. She was a theater major, had done several internships in theater, and worked afterwards for a short period in theater before she found something that fulfilled the need to do something meaningful by working for a literacy organization.

Professionally I do something totally different because of Texas 4000, I got in that organization and it made me realize that the reason I wasn't happy doing what I was doing was because it was very shallow and people, people treated it like a life or death experience and it wasn't at all. And really, unbeknownst to me at the time, I really didn't like that. And then being in Texas 4000, and realizing the things that were really important and how you could help people in a really meaningful and impactful way. And not that art can't be that, because it can be. But I feel like right now in the arts world, the majority of it is not that way. . . . And so, I made a total career shift because of that. I wanted to go into nonprofits, and I went and worked in theater for six months afterwards,

. . . and I came back and then I worked at a literacy organization as a vista. I never would've done AmeriCorps Vista without Texas 4000, ever.

Diane (2009 rider) conveyed that she had an internship lined up before she left for Texas 4000, realized it wasn't what she wanted to do because it wasn't meaningful:

As I got more involved in Texas 4000, even before we left for the ride, I was beginning to feel not confident that that was the route that I wanted to go with life. And after the ride it definitely secured that. And I thought this is too vain, I need something more; I don't mind party planning, but I need it to be for a cause, not just for frivolous reasons.

Carrie (2009 rider) doesn't ride as much as she thinks she could or should partly because it lacks the meaning and purpose that the Texas 4000 experience provided. She explained,

It's hard to like have done pretty much all the rides in the Austin area. And not be able to, to like replicate that experience. . . . I still like to get outside, and ride, but yea, seeing some of the stuff that I've seen, like Austin's pretty but it pales in comparison to some of the mountains that I've ridden through, and it's kind of hard.

Abigail (2008 rider) described how the ride helped her focus in on a field she was already considering:

I've always wanted to figure out what I wanted to do to help people but I knew I wasn't going to go into medicine. So I thought maybe I could do social work, I figured that out through school. And then when we got to Anchorage and we got to the children's unit and we go to the art, and we painted mugs for a fundraiser. I was like "what art therapy, what? Like this a real thing, no way." A light bulb went off, for the influence that I'm studying and for what I'm doing now I'm going to become an art therapist. But I think

that that's the best thing that ever happened to me to make a really positive spin on what happened and focus on the strengths of what I gained from a really terrible experience diagnosis. . . . I'm not sure I would be where I am right now if it wouldn't have been for Texas 4000 in all honesty. I always thought I would do something like social work but I probably would have gone a totally different route.

Lauren (2011 rider) also knew that she wanted to help people, but Texas 4000 helped her discover what she truly enjoyed and shifted her focus from being a doctor to helping others through counseling.

Part of me deciding to go into counseling was because of Texas 4000 and so I really liked talking to people who were going through cancer, or who were caregivers to cancer patients and seeing kind of like how they dealt with it and how they spoke about it. I really like that because I had moments where this is triumph of the human spirit in the flesh. I'm seeing it before my eyes and so it's just little moments like that where you might have been on your bike all day and complaining about the fact that you're just eating power bars for five days straight, and then you meet somebody and they're going through horrific things, and they're in terrible pain and they act as if they're humbled by you, and it's just this crazy rollover, so we're like "no, what are you talking about. I'm in a place of privilege of being able to do what I'm doing." So I really like that about Texas 4000 and it was through those interactions that I realized that being a doctor is cool, but I was really about getting to know people and hearing their stories and so that was ultimately why I decided to go into counseling.

For these riders, the sense of meaning and purpose wasn't necessarily created, but was more clearly defined as they met others. Others clearly had an impact in exposing the riders to new perspectives, and these new perspectives allowed them to direct this meaning and purpose in new directions.

Strong relationships

Interacting with others clearly allowed participants to consider new perspectives, something that would have been difficult without the experience as the ride provided a safe environment to share personal stories about cancer. Their stories and conversations throughout the experience helped individuals learn about themselves and others and build a sense of community among the riders. This togetherness that riders felt led to relationships with other riders and hosts that are something they cherish to this day.

Diane (2009 rider) summed up what she learned about herself by saying, "It made me so much more aware of how much of a better person I am when I'm surrounded by people different than me. And, how much they can bring, and how much we can learn from each other." Robin (2009 rider) described how the diversity of her teammates affected her experience by allowing her to be more open-minded and feel a part of a family or community:

I think the reason Texas 4000 was so transformational to me is because of the people it exposed me to. I never would've been friends with any of the diverse people on my team had Texas 4000 not brought us together. And so, it exposed me to all of these different cultures. We had teammates that were Pakistani, and Thai, and from Vietnam, and all over the place. We had teammates from Mexico and South America and so it just exposed me to this extremely diverse group of people that otherwise we probably

wouldn't have had anything in common, but we had Texas 4000 in common. And so, being able to get to know them, on such a level that I knew their hearts inside out, and I knew their cultures and I knew how their culture affected their heart. And their worldviews. It just made me think about the world so differently. Before Texas 4000, I think I had such a close-minded and judgmental view of the world. And I would say after Texas 4000, I'm very open-minded. . . . I'm really into social justice now. And causes like Teach for America, that I don't think that's something I ever would've considered had I not done Texas 4000 because its so progressive. . . . And I wasn't expecting to feel like a family with my teammates, and they became my family.

Lauren (2011 rider) added,

I definitely learned a lot about myself. In part, in going through the injury and then also just in meeting people along the way, I realized just how much contact and human interaction. . . . I didn't realize about how much random encounters with people, how meaningful and impactful those would be for me. And so I learned a lot about myself in those ways and but also through guest speakers and stuff like that, you learn how cancer works or other organizations that are involved with cancer research and stuff like that, so more broadly learn about that those kind of things.

Anna (2013 rider) also learned from others:

I learned a lot from my teammates about how if you're given an opportunity to help someone, you take it. If you are given an opportunity to help someone, talk to anybody, you take that opportunity. . . . I want to engage with you and I want to learn who you are, and I want to tell you about who I am. It taught me how to go beyond superficial

conversations with other people, and, and really engage with them, who they are, and what they want to do.

Joseph (2010 rider) also felt that getting beyond the superficial conversations was important to his experience. He described how he learned about his remarkable teammates:

Getting to know my teammates on a really intimate level [was really important]. This could be a bit of a theme here that I keep coming back to. In your regular life you don't see all of the depth that everyone has, you don't realize how rich everyone's personality is, even really shy people, you know the one's that never talk, or the ones that seem really boring. You just don't know them well enough. It's what Texas 4000 taught me. By spending 24 hours a day with those people for ten weeks, the things people try to hide, the flaws people try to make up for all come out eventually. You see the good and the bad in everybody on the team, you realize how remarkable just how people are.

For others, the relationships themselves are what they got out of the experience—they got to know their teammates and build what many described as a sense of camaraderie or family. This sense of community built with their teammates around cancer and their experience led to relationships they still have to this day. Several riders said that they met their significant other on the ride, and many talked about feeling like a family and how their teammates will be a part of their life for a long time. Sydney (2013 rider) explained,

There's this incredible sense of camaraderie around the fact that you've all lost somebody to cancer. And we bonded as a team around that . . . when we were having bad days, or when we got bad news about something, everybody was there to support everybody else

because they knew that they had gone through that too at some point and they all needed to somebody to support them.

Anna (2013 rider) said, “Ozarks is my family. . . . They’re the people that I can talk to about anything. Social norms don’t exist with them. They’re the most passionate and incredible people who fill me with purpose and who have the most purpose in their lives.” Emily (2004 rider) felt similarly, even ten years later. She framed this sense of community in terms of, “the camaraderie, the shared experience. You know, ten years later coming back to the Atlas ride, and sitting down with them, and being able to say “yea, we did this, and we started it.” Carrie (2009 rider) said her teammates became family.

It just got to the point where you really carried each other and you carried each other’s causes as well. . . . And it got to the end of the ride and all of us girls on the Rockies side were just like so enamored with the boys in like such a friendly and sisterly way, we were pretty much brothers and sisters at that point and all of us were just like, “Oh yea do we have any single girlfriends?” These would be the best boyfriends ever. But we weren’t romantically interested in them, that’s what it was.

Rick (2009 rider) was on the same route as Carrie and said, “My team got along very well. We were like a big happy family. There was just a lot of love.” These sentiments were echoed by another rider on the same route and year—Robin (2009 rider). She explained,

Every single person on our team just brought such an energy and such a passion for what we were doing and it just made it such a fun environment to be around. I just felt there was never any judgment; we could be as weird as we wanted to be, and it was embraced with open arms. . . . I just felt like every single member of the team was like a sibling. All

of the guys, I was not sexually attracted to them because they felt like my brothers, and the girls just felt like my sisters.

Calvin (2007 rider) went into great detail describing his teammates and how they were like family.

People really stepped up and just demonstrated their kind of trustworthiness, their value to the team, they were team players. I've never been a part of a team that really bonded before. I'm not a sportsperson and so the best I had was like I'm part of the reject. So we all hang out together and we don't bully each other, and that was as far as it went. . . . Like a family, we played a lot, we fought a little, we learned to rely on each other, I was consistently impressed by my teammates dedication or resourcefulness and that was a big source of joy because we started out as a group of a bunch of people, some of which were freshmen who had lived on their own for literally like a month and so, they were babies and I was like, "How are you going to become a human?" Watching them turn into this awesome human was not just the source of pride but a source of active joy. I used to be like, "You are growing. This is awesome." . . . By the end we were all family. I would trust any of them with my life. I love them dearly.

Will (2006 rider) said that the sense of community built through the experience was impactful and he even met his wife on the ride. "It had an impact on everything in my life. Most importantly, I met my wife, met a lot of my best friends today are people I rode with or who rode Sierra route." Several other riders commented on lasting relationships.

I met my husband. He was a rider on the Rocky route. So I would say that impacted my life quite a bit. He rode the Rockies route with me, but we didn't date until probably

about a year after the ride ended. Yea, a little over a year after the ride ended we started dating. And so, we got married, did the ride in '04, we got married in 2008. Been married for almost six years. We have two kids. I would say that was a pretty big impact. (Emily, 2004 rider)

I have a friend that I know that I can call at any time of the night and they're going to be there for me and it's not just your basic friendship, it's like something you get when you're a brother or sister to someone. I have a really good friend that I would never, ever trade for anything. It's silly but my T4K friends are essentially lifelong soul mate friends. (Francie, 2010 rider).

I did not know anyone going into it but I didn't do it to—in my head I wasn't like I'm going to make my best friend on the ride. I was like I'm doing this for myself and for my family and for the cause and whatever. And then they're my best friends. My team will be at my wedding, and they'll be in my wedding. And they'll know my children and they'll be at my funeral and those are the people forever. And so, I was not anticipating that when I signed up for the ride. (Rachel, 2012 rider)

These strong emotional relationships extended beyond one's own teammates and includes other alumni as well. Recent rider Sydney (2013) said she still enjoys being on the bike with the Texas 4000 community: ,

I still really like to ride my bike. That bike is probably the most precious thing I own. I would never, never, never get rid of that bike. . . . So there are like seven or eight alums

who live out here in the Bay Area. And so I've been going on rides with them, which is great . . . and I live thirty miles from where I work. . . . I've been jumping on rides with [coworkers], which is pretty fun. And they're all really commuting so it's kind of a different type of cycling. But I actually love to still ride my bike. . . . I wouldn't ride my bike at all, I wouldn't even own a bike if it wasn't for Texas 4000. We get our bikes from them, and if we make it to Anchorage we get to keep our bikes. So I definitely wouldn't even have a bicycle without them and not, certainly not any knowledge or training being comfortable riding in the city, at all.

Similarly, Rachel (2012 rider) described how the community and cycling go together:

To me, it's a Texas 4000 thing. Cycling and Texas 4000 are molded in my mind, so I would never be like I'm going to go for a bike ride by myself; I wouldn't enjoy that. It's very much because of the people I'm with, that makes it enjoyable.

Rachel also said she stayed involved in the cancer community through one of the riders from her team:

I'm currently on the board of Color Cancer. So that's an organization that was started by a high school kid to raise money for his mother who had cancer. And then, it was kind of taken over by one of our ride directors during our ride year, and she kind of focused on that and then she reached out to me after the ride to be on the board.

Transitioning and Post-T4K Depression

These strong relationships with with teammates and other riders made it leaving the community very difficult. Almost everybody expressed having some sort of difficulty adjusting back into everyday life. Everyday life had responsibilities and choices, which was

overwhelming for some, and not having the community to support them made the transition even more difficult. Some adjusted back quite quickly, while others suffered from Post-T4K Depression.

Emily (2004 rider) described how tough it was to have so many things to think about after seventy days of riding:

It was pretty abrupt. It was kind of hard to come back after. I mean you were in this mindset of like bike, eat, sleep, bike, eat, sleep, talk to cool people, bike, eat, sleep, see beautiful scenery, and that was it. . . . It was so surreal to like have done all this and to be in Anchorage, get on a plane, and then, seven hours later, to walk off the plane in Austin, and be like, “Are you freaking kidding me? Like it took me seventy, it took me ten weeks to get there. It takes seven hours to get home. And now, you know, now what?” And so, then you had to get back into the swing of, “Ok, I’ve got to pay rent, I’ve got to go buy groceries, I’ve got to go to school, I’ve got to” . . . you know the first thing I did was get my oil changed in my car. It was a weird transition in terms of just the mindset of being in that situation and coming back and having to think about so many different things.

Michael (2006 rider) echoed Emily’s statements about how many different things there were to think about.:

That was so much harder than transitioning to it! . . . because it’s a very, very different lifestyle. When you do the ride you pretty much wake up in the morning, you eat, you get on the bike, you ride, you eat, you get off and you eat more and then you sleep and that’s it. You only care about a couple of things: how far is it? How much is there to eat? Where am I sleeping tonight? And that’s about it . . . there’s so little to worry about. You don’t

really have to make too many decisions or think about things. Then you get back and all of a sudden, first of all, you get up in the morning and you think, “What am I going to do today? Whoa you mean I have options?” . . . Adjusting back to normal life was actually a lot harder because there was a lot more things you have to think about.

In addition to having so many options, others missed the friends they had made and the closeness they felt on the ride. Thomas (2009 rider) described how both were a part of his transition:

We came back and two days later everybody from my clique, we were all sleeping in the same tent every night, at least in the same corner of the gym or whatever. And, so, we hung out at one of our apartments, and went out drinking, and came back and all chilled in a 600 square foot apartment, right. We all ended up sleeping in the same room, like four of us on the bed. It was like the monkeys, right. Like four of us on the bed, three of us on the floor, like around the bed. Just cause like we, we missed it. And it was so normal to do that. The transition back was, it was weird like waking up in the morning and not having something that I knew I had to do that day...for example, when I wake up tomorrow like I have to be at work, I don't have to be at work. Though when you wake up on Texas 4000 you have to get on your bike, and you have to ride that bike, between 60 and 110 miles. That's just not at all negotiable, or the team doesn't move on. And so that was a weird transition for me . . . I think the main thing is the transition was just . . . I have so many options now.

For Robin (2009 rider), “it was really hard coming back to reality.” She recognized that many people get Post-T4K Depression, but wasn't actually depressed herself.

We had just spent two and a half months actually feeling like we were waking up, changing the world. And we were part of something so much greater than ourselves. And then to come back to Austin and start normal life again was just, it was just really hard...a lot of alumni get kind of depressed and some people's is worse than others. But, I guess it was it was hard getting used to the idea that I wouldn't be waking up every single morning and feeling like I just accomplished something so great, and I was doing something valiant. And it was also hard getting used to the feeling of physically exhausting myself every day. There was something really satisfying in that. Going to bed, physically, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted every night. But life continued...it was just kind of hard. I wasn't actually depressed.

Anna's (2013 rider) struggles came because she studied abroad immediately following participation and so she had no one to share her experience with.

I don't know anybody [here]. Or now I do. But back then I didn't know anybody. It's not like these people knew that I had just ridden my bike to Alaska. And then I had nobody to talk to about it. Its funny because my friends back in Austin . . . people got really tired of them talking about it—about their experience over the summer. That's all that they could talk about. But I haven't had that opportunity to tell these stories or be really annoying about Texas 4000. Because it's difficult to express what this is to a total stranger. A stranger who doesn't really care because...they don't really care to find out what that experience was like . . . and that's frustrating to me.

There were some who didn't suffer from depression, although they knew that others did. Jack (2012 rider) just didn't have a reason to be sad, he could still do exciting things and was still able to keep in touch with his community. He said,

After you do the ride, you're done—like you're not in the organization anymore. However, they add you to an alumni list . . . there are plenty of opportunities to be involved with Texas 4000 . . . and some people actually like do get depressed after the ride because they have this thing and this goal that they've been working towards. And then they achieve it. And then it's done, and sometimes like your whole team like splits and goes off their own separate ways and that can be really difficult for people. For me, I felt like I handled the transition very well. I never felt like sad or like depressed because I wasn't in it anymore. And, it was an amazing experience, and I absolutely loved it. And I'll always have those memories, and that, like that's what makes me happy. I don't see any reason to be sad about that. And I'm still in communication with my teammates and we still like hang out every now and then.

For Eric (2013 rider) and Anthony (2009 rider), having things to do helped with their transition out of Texas 4000.

I knew that a lot of people go through like depression like when they get back because they're not around their teammates anymore and they really, really miss them. So I just got, right away just started doing things. I think that really helped. Cause if you sit around, and sit at home and you're bored, I miss everyone. But if you're out doing things than I think the transition out of it's a lot easier. (Eric, 2013 rider)

I felt like the transition out was, in a way, I felt like it was a lot tougher for other people. For me, I was just like I have to get back and start classes again. So it was a bummer kind of thing, because you got a chance to do something great everyday and see something new everyday, instead of being stuck in one place and back in classes, it was kind of a sad thing. (Anthony, 2009 rider)

However, many riders did suffer from Post-T4K Depression—people struggled with not being on the bike anymore, not being surrounded by teammates, and dealing with not having this immediately salient sense of purpose anymore. These struggles are exemplified by the following riders.

There's almost like a mourning period, where it's hard to get on a bike after that. I kind of wondered if it's from like a physiological perspective in terms of like your endorphins aren't like all up anymore because you're not riding your bike anymore. But you get kind of depressed . . . it's a hard experience to have an end, even though you know it's going to. (Carrie, 2009 rider)

At the end of Texas 4000 you come back and it's depressing. You are obviously not getting your endorphins anymore, you're not on the bike. You don't have people around you 24/7, which is, people think of that is a really bad thing, but it's not that bad, it's actually something that kind of grows on you and you're left with nothing. But there's nothing when you get back . . . But feeling very depressed after was not cool. (Francie, 2010 rider)

There's the whole re-entry period into real life. I think that was pretty hard for me. I don't think I handled it that well. I felt pretty bummed for a couple months afterwards. And, that's something that happens to a lot of people who go on a long journey or something out in the woods and then come back. And. I think the whole, every day life type thing was a little much for me at that point. Cause, like I said before your only responsibility was biking every day. And, then you come straight back and then I went back into marching band. So you know, football games every weekend, and school, and all that. So, all that combined, I didn't handle it that well. But, after awhile you got used to it. But I think, keeping in touch with some of the other people from the ride that helps after you come back with the whole re-entry period. (Arthur, 2008 rider)

After the ride, I was severely depressed. I sought therapy; I had to go talk to a counselor. I couldn't, I didn't have any empathy for people that were dealing with everyday problems. So, my mother struggled a lot with like multi-tasking, and for her having to go to the grocery store in traffic, and to get the dry cleaning, and to make dinner, that's like a lot for her, like that's very overwhelming for her. I did not relate to her after the ride, I got anxiety around her because she thought she had problems, and I was like you don't have problems, people are dying of cancer. I actually got diagnosed with post secondary stress disorder. It's very common in with like nurses and doctors that like see a lot of wounded soldiers, they internalize that and then they have anxiety about the war, even though they're not directly involved and so I had a lot of anxiety about that . . . but I was actually diagnosed with a condition because of it. I just had no sympathy or empathy for

people that were dealing with the struggles of everyday life, because I had seen so many worse problems. And, so that was really hard for me to get into the swing of life. (Rachel, 2012 rider)

Sometimes in addition to leaving Texas 4000, other life issues added to the difficulty of leaving the program. Lauren (2007 rider) said that she, “really struggled with after leaving TEXAS 4000, kind of the transition out of Texas 4000,” not only because the ride was over but because a family member was diagnosed with cancer shortly after the ride. She talked about not having the community support was difficult:

I realize that the nature of the program is such that it can't be continued forever, and that your involvement afterwards is as much as you want to put forth, but I felt like in leaving there wasn't much of a support around on how to continue to stay involved. Like for myself I finished the ride, I was already struggling with the fact that I wasn't around other people that I knew and loved, but a few months later my Mom found out that she also has melanoma, so it was the type of thing where it's like, “OK I've been through this process, I've done all of these things” and you know before when you found out that, or you've met someone or you found out someone in your family has cancer, Ok I'm going to dedicate my ride to this week. Which doesn't really mean anything, but it's a way for you to cope and it's this nice thing, it's a gesture, meaningless as it is, it's a gesture. Now you don't even have that gesture to make anymore and for me that was a really hard thing to deal with because cancer is kind of this, tend to feel very helpless at times. So I had a hard time with the transition of leaving Texas 4000 and that's something.

For Calvin (2007 rider), a lot of the struggle was moving on with life and being disconnected from his community—something that many of those who graduated and moved away for a job or school after Texas 4000 felt.

It was a pretty abrupt change from like I am doing the thing I love with the people I love everyday to, well I'm thinking about the thing I did this summer everyday but it's not forward-looking, it's reminiscing at this point, it's not really 'I'm not growing anymore' and then I moved to Portland where I didn't know anybody. . . . I don't have any friends. I have a network, I have a huge network in Austin I mean, my going-away party before the trip was with 300 people, we floated three kegs before midnight and we're just like okay my people are here and I left all my people. It wasn't so much postpartum from Texas 4000 as it was from everything I'd ever known.

Rick (2009 rider) described at length his struggle with leaving Texas 4000 and starting his first job.

It was tough. It was really tough. We spent like the entire time biking, spending so many hours exercising. In the sun, you were with incredible people, you're doing something incredible. I mean you were on such a high both physiologically and emotionally. And then you get back and all of a sudden you crash . . . before that, before Texas 4000 [my first job] was exactly what I wanted to do. I mean I was so excited about starting with this company. And then afterwards I remember being like “God, damn it. Like why am I spending like 12, 13 hours working on this. Why am I looking at a computer, why am I so miserable?” I kind of felt like there was a Rick who had done something really incredible both in crew and in Texas 4000, and the person I was afterwards was kind of

lame, and kind of ordinary and that was something a lot of us dealt with. I think a lot of it is the physiological crash. Biking ten hours a day then after that, what you maybe get in an hour, workout . . . that was really tough. A lot of people, the idea of Post Texas 4000 Depression is something that a lot people talk about. And I know it affected a lot of us, really strongly. . . . I think in my case specifically it took a long time because . . . there was Texas 4000 depression and then after that, as I said I hated my job . . . And then I was going through some emotional turmoil—unrelated turmoil. So what should have been maybe a two or three month affair, well, the Post T4K Depression. And it just being the beginning of what was like a really shitty year.

DISCUSSION

Participating in an extraordinary experience had both short term and enduring impacts on participants. Riders gained a sense of meaning and purpose from the ride that they carried over to other areas of their life, increased their sense of empowerment and confidence that led to feelings of being able to do anything, and built enduring relationships that contributed to a sense of community and an affinity for Texas 4000K and its associated activities and causes. However, leaving the experience was hard for many individuals—leading some to suffer from Post-T4K Depression. In all, though, participating in the ride had generally positive, enduring affects on the riders' attitudes and behaviors.

Such an extreme adventure led many to believe that they could do anything; their sense of empowerment and confidence had risen, and this lasted beyond the ride. Many riders expressed nervousness about joining Texas 4000, especially as they lacked experience fundraising or cycling. Having to learn these new skills seemed daunting, and, in particular,

biking across the country seemed nearly impossible. Once riders had completed the adventure, however, they realized that they could do something that they had never thought they would or could do.

Empowerment can be defined as “a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness” and the removal of these conditions (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Self-efficacy is one’s judgment of his/her own ability to perform a task in a specific domain (Bandura, 1982). Riders definitely expressed enhanced feelings of being able to perform cycling and physical tasks. However, they were able to take these feelings beyond the domain of the ride and said that they could apply them to other areas. They were able to overcome conditions that foster powerlessness by overcoming challenges along the way and successfully learning new skills. The sense of newness, the emotional intensity felt, and support given along the ride, allowed riders to be transformed more wholly by the experience. By exploring their personal limits and succeeding at something they weren’t sure they could do, participants were able to take these lessons and apply them beyond the ride.

Participants were able to learn from their experiences and consider new perspectives. In particular, a number of participants expressed feeling appreciation for the generosity their hosts showed them, but also from learning about others’ experiences with cancer. Cause has previously been shown to inspire participants during physical activity (Filo et al., 2009), as it did here. However, beyond the experience, participants expressed that they were able to extend this sense of appreciation into their post-ride lives. This translated into pursuing passions and seeing

the big picture, instead of being bothered by little things. For many these passions were physical in nature as they continued participating in endurance sports.

Participating in such a grand adventure at such a young age left many riders wondering if they would have any other grand adventures in their life. Some expressed feeling during the ride that it would be very hard to do so, which was disheartening. However, by the end of the ride, with encouragement of others, riders bought into the idea to not let this be their greatest adventure. By that, it was meant that riders should not just go about life with no forethought or purpose, but that they should continue to strive to pursue adventures and help others. This saying is passed down, from year to year, to help riders deal with that disheartening feeling and encourage them to continue to live with a meaning and purpose, whether that be to enjoy every day, serve others, or strive to continue to do big things.

As mentioned previously, the ride gave participants a sense of meaning and purpose—by riding their bikes they were making an impact on the fight against cancer. Although some came into the ride with this purpose, others gained it along the way through their interactions with other team members and those in the community. Many riders did not want to lose this feeling (and struggled with losing it initially), but made adjustments in their life to continue to live with meaning and purpose. This includes making drastic adjustments such as changing majors, jobs, or career paths in order to find something more meaningful, or something smaller like volunteering more. Those who did change majors or careers generally chose something that gave them a chance to give back or improve the lives of others—thus giving them a feeling of meaning and purpose.

Cancer gave meaning and purpose to the ride, but participants were able to apply this to other areas of their life. Ride dedication circles and hospital visits allowed participants to learn more about cancer's effect, but in that process they considered other perspectives and how doing something with meaning and purpose was important to them. Taking this information, they squared it with their existing assumptions about what they wanted to do or be, and adjusted accordingly by changing their behaviors. Personal transformations clearly occurred as part of the larger extraordinary experience. Experiences with meaning and purpose have the ability to allow participants to discover new things and reflect upon their own lives and make decisions to go in new directions based on this information. Encouragingly, these impacts are still prevalent even many years later, indicating that the meaning and purpose of the ride may have enhanced the strength of the transformation in that participants felt it changed them for the better or fulfilled some need.

The strong relationships led to a sense of community, which included an affinity for both Texas 4000 and for the cancer community. Relationships built during the ride also helped participants meet a diverse group of individuals, learn how to work with others, cope with tragedies in their life, complete the ride, and develop the rituals, symbols, and shared experiences that helped the experience endure. In the end, many participants described their teammates as family.

Participants described their teammates as diverse, and helped them see different perspectives. Robin (2009 rider), for example, described getting to know a Pakistani teammate and how his family was affected after September 11th; previously she had grown up in a small town without a lot of diversity, and hearing his story made her realize that she couldn't

generalize based on skin color. Other individuals talked about how diverse their team was, and how they were able to learn about other cultures. Riders also talked about how they had to learn to work with their teammates—who often were strong-willed individuals, like themselves. This led to a lot of clashes within the teams that riders had to learn to overcome.

What brought riders together, however, was the need for support throughout the ride, which teammates provided through blocking the wind or providing emotional support on tough days. The ride provided a group experience around which riders developed a sense of community. They had a common purpose and goal that transcended the activity—to fight cancer. The community arose around this purpose and members provided support in many different ways. Some members came to trust their teammates enough to open up about the tragedies in their life—something they hadn't been able to do previously.

As the sense of community developed, personal transformations were also occurring, as riders were able to learn from each other and grow with each other. Unsurprisingly, riders felt a need to keep these influences in their lives. The bond they developed with each other and sense of community carried over beyond participation—usually with only a few of the riders that they felt closest too. Unexpectedly, those riders who weren't looking to make new friends as they were juniors or seniors with an established network still made lifelong friends, suggesting the connections they made filled some need that their established relationships were unable to fulfill.

The transition back into the real world was tough for many—having so many choices was overwhelming and they missed the simplicity and camaraderie of the trip. Being pulled away from their community was tough to overcome—especially when they moved soon after the ride. This was such a common occurrence that Texas 4000 riders have dubbed it “Post-T4K

Depression.” These feelings are similar to what other researchers have found (Arnould & Price, 1993). The simplicity and camaraderie were so valued by participants that they struggled without them. Participants who avoided these feelings found other things to fulfill their needs and wants—they joined other organizations and stayed involved. Others stayed involved in the organization through mentoring and interviewing and helping in any way possible.

For individuals, this suggests that the transformation was so complete that their previous life (or new life for those who had graduated and were starting jobs) could no longer fulfill their needs. To fulfill these new needs of meaning, purpose, giving back, and seeking adventure, many riders continued volunteering (both for Texas 4000 and for other organizations) and participating in endurance sports.

Chapter Seven: Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to describe the experience of participating in Texas 4000 and the effects of this experience on participants. Participants' recollections of their experience show that it was an extraordinary experience and transformed their perspectives. Participants' transformations would not have occurred without their extraordinary experience and the interactions and challenges it provided. In other words, participants' lives would not have been the same without this experience, and its impacts have implications not only for their own futures, but also for the organizations that provide them.

The findings of this research underscore the importance of building strong relationships and meaning and purpose to the experience and also to the transformation resulting in a sense of empowerment and desire to continue living with meaning and purpose. From an organizational perspective, the extraordinary group experience develops communities with a common goal and purpose. The role of the extraordinary experience in transforming individuals and developing communities must be understood to help organizations understand how to build engaged and invested consumers. To this end, the findings contribute to the current understanding of extraordinary experiences by underscoring the importance of understanding consumers, as participant background influences the extraordinary experience and the transformations that take place.

Consistent with other consumer behavior research, participants had different motivations to join the organization (cf. Beard & Ragheb, 1983; Crompton, 1979; Filo, Funk & O'Brien, 2008; Snelgrove & Wood, 2010). Texas 4000 participants presented three main reasons for joining the organization—cancer-related, adventure-related, and relation-related. Those who

joined for cancer-related reasons did so because they wanted to do something about the problem of cancer or they wanted to honor and support loved ones. Adventure-related reasons centered around seeking an adventure, either through the sport or through seeing new things and traveling across the country. Finally, relation-related reasons included wanting to meet new people and meet others with similar backgrounds. For most people there was a predominant motive for joining either cancer- or adventure-related, and the other reasons were secondary or non-existent. These different predominant motives were due to participant backgrounds. For example, someone who had lost a family member was primarily motivated by cancer-related reasons, while someone else who did not have such a strong connection to cancer wanted to join for the adventure. While organizations focus on understanding these motivations to join in order to attract more individuals to events, it is also important to understand how these differences affect the experience and impacts. For example, Hassay and Peloza (2009) argue that there are two methods of developing community that differ based on whether identifies with a charity or brand before or after involvement with the community; one either identifies with the charity, becomes involved and then develops a sense of community, or one first becomes involved with the charity, develops a sense of community within the charity, and then becomes identified. With more knowledge regarding differences in consumers, experiences, and impacts, organizations can tailor the experience as well as continue the relationship with participants beyond the initial experience.

For those who were motivated primarily by cancer-related reasons, the experience centered around fighting cancer and sharing their own experiences with cancer. For them, activities that didn't include the meaning and purpose of the ride (fighting cancer) were

unsatisfying. Indeed many of these participants explained that volunteering for sponsors at non-cancer-related events were seen as pointless because there was no cancer-related element. However, even among individuals who felt this way, there were attempts to justify volunteering at sponsor events because they were giving back to sponsors who were helping the cause or they were able to interact with others at these events and spread awareness about the organization and the cause. Other primarily cause-focused participants explained that they didn't put much effort into the cycling and training during the year because it was difficult or wasn't enjoyable, which made the first few weeks of the ride extremely difficult because they weren't as in shape as their peers. As they rode through the summer, though, they came to see the physical act of cycling as a metaphor for the battle against cancer and felt that each pedal stroke was allowing them to do something to contribute to the fight. Even their relationships developed through the cause and sharing their experiences with cancer with their teammates and hosts. Similar to Wood, Snelgrove, and Danylchuk's (2010) findings, riders who were primarily looking to fulfill cause-related motivations centered their experience around fulfilling those needs.

This focus on battling cancer affected how the experience impacted those motivated by cancer-related reasons. Because these participants were able to work towards fighting cancer by spreading awareness, interacting with others, cycling, and raising funds, they found meaning and purpose that they then wanted to carry over into the rest of their lives. This may also be a sense of moral responsibility they felt to the community they developed, as participants passed down from year to year the saying that they shouldn't let Texas 4000 be the best thing they ever do. The sense of empowerment they felt from completing the ride and participating in the fight against cancer applied to efforts outside of cycling—they felt like they could chase their dreams

and continue to do good by serving others. Many already were a part of the community of those affected by cancer, but being able to participate in the community through sharing their cancer stories they were able to feel a consciousness of kind with each other—they were all in the same fight against cancer.

Those who were primarily seeking an adventure did not have such a cancer-centric experience. Because they were seeking adventure, they were not as bothered by doing things that did not involve cancer and were generally more excited about training and learning how to ride a bike, and enjoyed the physical challenges on the ride more. Despite not focusing on seeking cancer, these riders were still affected by cancer; during their participation they learned about their teammates' and hosts' experiences and came to better understand how cancer affects individuals and their friends and family. They expressed feeling inadequate because they did not have this direct connection to cancer, something that those who did have a connection to cancer quickly tried to assuage by explaining that they had built a connection now through knowing and supporting those with a direct connection. Those with connections were welcoming and empathizing those without, practices that Schau, Muñiz and Arnould (2009) found create value individuals realize from brand communities. Those with no cancer connections (or no close connections) identified as marginalized members of the community, or didn't feel like they were legitimate members because they didn't have the same history as other members. This may be because it is more important for members to have a history of or willingness to fight against cancer than an affinity for cycling or sport, and that members built connections to cancer through learning about others' perspectives. The focus on cancer is one of the core values for all participants and the community, although to varying degrees, similar to Schouten and

McAlexander's (1995) ethos of subcultures. Additionally, this would align with a hierarchy in which those with cancer connections are at the top of the order in this brand community (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

Again, as with the experience, the impacts for adventure-seeking individuals were different. First, through fundraising, programs, hospital visits, interacting with hosts, and building relationships with their teammates, these individuals came to feel a sense of community mostly with their teammates but also within the larger imagined cancer community. The exposure to so many individuals doing something for a greater cause (and doing so much for a cause as well) gave them new perspectives and appreciation for what others had done and for their own bodies and capabilities. Finally, many participants who were seeking an adventure enjoyed the sport and challenges so much that they continued seeking physical challenges—their sense of empowerment applied directly to the physical realm.

These differences between the primary motivations—cancer or adventure—resulted in different interpretations of the same extraordinary experience and different impacts. This affirms Hassay and Pelozo's (2009) conceptual model of brand community development in the charity sector of both cognitive- and experiential learning mechanisms. Participants who already identified with the cause (cancer-related motivated individuals) increased their participation by joining Texas 4000 and developed a sense of community, akin to the cognitive-learning mechanism. Adventure-seeking participants became involved with cause, perceived the sense of community through participation, and internalized this through identification with the community, as Hassay and Pelozo (2009) described the experiential-learning mechanism. Importantly, the findings of this study clarify the differences in learning mechanisms during the

experience and extend these differences to the personal transformations felt, impacts that participation has on the individual from being a part of this community. Also, previous research regarding extraordinary experiences has acknowledged differences in expectations but not thoroughly explored how these experiences differ for individuals and how those differences affect the impacts and transformations (cf. Arnould & Price, 1993; Dodson, 1996; Schouten et al., 2007).

Each element of the extraordinary experience played a role in the personal transformations of the riders. Interpersonal relationships, the rituals and traditions, memorable and intense challenges, new and unusual events and activities, and building a sense of community all led to personal transformations resulting in continuing relationships, a sense of moral responsibility to continue living with meaning and purpose, and a sense of empowerment that endured for years beyond the experience. For organizations looking to build a sense of community around their brand or cause or sport, providing an opportunity for personal transformations through extraordinary experiences is one method to build long-term change. Previously, researchers have shown that one characteristic of extraordinary experiences is a feeling of personal growth (Arnould & Price, 1993), and argue that these experiences can help integrate consumers into brand communities (Schouten et al., 2007). The findings of this study support this research, and extend the understanding of how extraordinary experiences create personal transformations and community integration beyond just the brand to include other associations of the experience (i.e., cancer, cycling, fitness, and cause) that extend the impact of the experience for many years.

Preparing for the ride allowed for riders to develop relationships with other teammates. However, the extraordinary experience and isolation of the ride forced riders to get to know one another on a much deeper level. Riding to Alaska isolated riders from their established networks and required support from teammates, contributing to the development of a sense of *communitas* and devotion to a larger goal, similar to Arnould and Price's (1993) findings that *communitas* could be created on short river rafting trips. For Texas 4000 riders this sense of *communitas* extended beyond the trip; they felt a sense of responsibility to each other (as is present in brand communities), but this sense of responsibility extended beyond the team to include a sense of responsibility to hosts and future team members.

Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2001) brand community markers included moral responsibility to the community and individual members of the community. As participants developed relationships around sharing cancer-related experiences a sense of meaning and purpose for their lives developed which also continued to be important for individuals as they continued to try to fulfill the responsibility to the community of "Not letting this be their greatest adventure." The core values of the organization contributed to the sense of responsibility that developed. Even after the experience was over, the sense of responsibility to the greater purpose of the community was still important—even if it broadened beyond the narrow purpose of fighting cancer to generally trying to better society. These findings extend previous research by demonstrating that extraordinary experiences create sense of community faster than normal, every day experiences. They allow participants to develop a sense of moral responsibility, consciousness of kind and common core values, shared rituals and traditions, and a hierarchy that are essential for building a sense of community among participants and a transformation of self (Arnould & Price, 1993;

Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Schouten et al., 2007). For sport and cause organizations looking to build a strong community, providing experiences where participants have to rely on each other while reaching a larger goal can build this sense of community that extends beyond the experience.

Participants found meaning and purpose in the ride through their experience. Rituals like Why I Ride and ride dedications during the year, as well as ride dedication circles and programs during the ride were important in focusing, or re-focusing, riders on the purpose of the ride. These rituals and traditions helped participants internalize the core values of the Texas 4000 community, and are markers of brand communities that celebrate the history of the brand and sharing brand stories (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Brandfests and other charity events help have been shown to transform participants and give them a sense of being "in" the community (McAlexander & Schouten, 1998; McAlexander, et al., 2002). Participating in the rituals and traditions of Texas 4000 reinforced the meaning and purpose of the ride, and also introduced many members to new perspectives. Participants who had limited experiences with cancer came to understand what having cancer looked like and how it affected those who had dealt with sick friends and families. They felt like outsiders for not having the same experiences, but those who did have a direct cancer connection assured them that they were. Through participating in the rituals and traditions around cancer they were able to consider new perspectives and integrate them with their current understanding of cancer, illness, life, and themselves.

This new understanding and sense of community also contributed to the sense of moral responsibility to continue trying to better society. The rituals and traditions allowed the meaning

of the Texas 4000 to be imparted to new team members and individuals outside the team (e.g. hosts), which these individuals then carried beyond the experience and integrated into their self-definition. This highlights the role of the community in the transformation process, as the meaning and purpose of the community became integral to many team members' self-views. Unlike other extraordinary experiences where the community is often built around a goal that is achieved through the community (such as in river rafting), the goal of curing cancer is not going to be achieved solely through Texas 4000 efforts, and remains after the experience. While this is similar to brand communities, where the brand endures after the community, unlike brand communities, the meaning and purpose is not centered around the brand but around a larger ideal. The results of this study show that extraordinary experiences can build communities around more than just a brand or an activity, and that the rituals and traditions of the community are integral in helping individuals consider other perspectives that can change their self-definition. For organizations, this underscores the importance of understanding how the community is built, and around what it is built, as it affects the involvement with the organization, brand, and other community members beyond the experience.

The experience provided individuals with personal and social challenges that were new and unusual as well as memorable and intense. Being able to overcome these challenges led to a sense of empowerment that extended beyond just physical ability. Empowerment is “a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy” through identification and elimination of conditions that encourage powerlessness (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Participants were able to overcome challenges (such as climbing a mountain, dealing with an injury, or fighting cancer) by placing them in a larger context and relying on teammates for support. Many participants described

times when they were struggling on the bike and made it to the end of the day because they realized that fighting cancer is much harder or because they were riding for someone that day. Participants also described how their teammates were able to support them on tough days by talking to them or blocking the wind, for example. Participants' conditions of powerlessness included lack of knowledge and skill, opportunity, and confidence. Through training and actually completing the ride, participants were able to eliminate these conditions. Importantly, participants were able to take these feelings of empowerment and apply them beyond the scope of activities and challenges they conquered in their experience. While self-renewal and personal growth are associated with extraordinary experiences (cf. Arnould & Price, 1993; Schouten et al., 2007), these findings support that the community is just as important as the experience to transformation (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Sport and cause organizations can take advantage of this empowerment by encouraging these participants to stay involved in the organization, and spread the message, meaning and purpose to potential new consumers.

The importance of community to organizations has been well-established (cf. McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Shared group experiences, such as extraordinary experiences serve to build these communities, but importantly, they facilitate personal transformations that extend the community and impacts beyond the ride. Because of the unusual events, sense of newness, and introduction to others, participants were exposed to new views about themselves, others, sport, and cancer. The rituals and traditions, the relationships, and the shared experiences helped build a sense of community before and during the ride. Combined, these elements were the foundation for initiating personal transformation and sense of community, which then led to participant

impacts that lasted years. These results build on previous research by supporting the importance of communities to individuals and organizations and describing the role of the experience in creating this community and transforming individuals. Additionally, it is important to note that differences in individual's motivations and history influenced their experience and resulting impacts as there has been little attention to these differences.

The purpose of this study was to examine the impacts of an extraordinary experience on participants. Participants described both personal transformations and the development of a sense of community with other riders, the organization, and the larger cancer community. Personal transformations affected the organization, but also had much broader sport and cause impacts for the individual. The extraordinary experience was the impetus for these personal and community changes, indicating that participation in an organization is not enough—interaction with others and escaping the ordinary are necessary to build enduring change.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

While not every experience can be memorable (Carú & Cova, 2003), there is value in providing such experiences for consumers. As Schouten, McAlexander and Koenig (2007) found, these experiences can enhance people's relationships with other people, objects, activities, values and symbols and strengthen one's ties to a brand community in the form of brand loyalty—important outcomes for organizations. Sport organizations looking to build a brand community do so because they are associated with higher levels of consumer identification, involvement, and commitment (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Based on the findings of this study, extraordinary experiences can build a sense of community, and

organizations should not underestimate these experiences. Organizations can provide experiences that are new and unusual, trigger high levels of emotional intensity, and require interpersonal interaction. These characteristics contribute to the sense of community and transformation through rituals, shared experiences, symbols, and language used within members of the community. As such, organizations should gain a better understanding of what their consumers feel is extraordinary and what would be new and unusual and then provide experiences that are extraordinary.

Organizations should also understand their participants' backgrounds and motivations. Understanding participants' background and history has previously been shown to be important for organizations as it can impact their loyalty to events (Wood et al., 2010). There is support in the data for ensuring this understanding is a priority. Participants with different experiences and different motives will not have the same challenges and will take away different impacts from different experiences. By understanding these backgrounds and motives, organizations can tailor their experiences to provide elements that will expose participants to new perspectives and ways of understanding. For example, if participants have very little experience with cancer, taking them to hospitals and introducing them to individuals who have been impacted by cancer can allow them to experience first-hand a new perspective on the issue, or if they have very little experience with cycling, teaching them the necessary skills and introducing them to cycling groups outside of the organization can allow them to feel empowered.

Also, to encourage continued involvement in the organization, or larger communities (of sport and cause in this case) a structured exit strategy should be implemented to prevent negative consequences due to completion of the experience. Participants who have been transformed and

relied heavily on the sense of community throughout the experience struggle with re-entry into the everyday world. Organizations should take advantage of this opportunity to encourage consumers to continue to be involved with the community and utilize their transformation to better the community and organization. There is also an opportunity for other organizations (i.e. not the one providing the experience to help participants transition from the experience to their lives. Through partnerships with the experience provider, these organizations could take advantage of newfound skills and meaning and purpose to help participants fulfill their needs and stay involved in the larger communities associated with the experience (e.g. cycling, fitness, cancer, or cause). For example, local bicycle shops could recruit participants to help lead rides or join their training groups and non-profits could recruit volunteers with extensive fundraising experience. Providing a more structured exit from the experience could help limit the sense of trauma and depression riders felt and take advantage of their transformation and need for meaning and purpose in their lives.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with any study, there are limitations to the findings. First, the data collection relied on participant recall, which presents limitations in regard to reliability of recollections. As participants become farther removed from the experience it becomes more difficult to remember all details. However, participants from the first few years were still able to recall specific memories from their journey, although some of the details may have been left out or misremembered. The assumption is that participants were able to recall important elements of the ride. It was also important for riders from all years to be included as part of the purpose of the study was to understand the impacts over time. Thus, riders from the first years were able to

provide evidence as to how enduring the impacts are. Future research can address this limitation through data collection at the time of the experience, such as through an ethnographic study of such extraordinary experiences.

Second, the organization in this study is rather specific in scope—one cause and one sport. There is a history of connection between cancer and cycling in terms of other rides and training groups. While this study explores that connection, it is unclear whether the findings are unique to this sport and cause, or whether the same types of elements and impacts might be found in organizations that focus on other causes or sports, or in organizations that are not tied to a cause or sport. For example, would the impacts be similar for a cross-country ride that does not raise money for a cause, or raises money for a cause that is not life threatening or prevalent in today's society. In the future, studies can examine whether these findings are specific to sport and cause or a broader pattern in other organizational settings.

Table 1: Alumni Participant Background Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Ride Year	Ride Route	School Year Leading up to Ride	Leadership Position	Current Age	Graduation Year	Major
Robert	Male	2011			None	25	2011	Civil Engineering
Sydney	Female	2013			None	22	2013	Psychology
Marcus	Male	2012	Sierra	Junior	Program Coordinator	23	2012	Advertising
Francie	Female	2010	Sierra	Junior	None	24	2011	Communication Sciences and Disorders
Abigail	Female	2008	Sierra	Senior	None	27	2009	Anthropology and Scandinavian Studies
Carolyn	Female	2012	Rockies	Senior	Finance Chair & Assistant Ride Director	24	2012	Mechanical Engineering
Lauren	Female	2011	Sierra	Freshman	Fitness Chair	22	2013	Exercise Science
Rachel	Female	2012	Rockies	Senior	Business Development Committee	24	2011	Applied Learning and Development, Specialization in Youth Community Studies; Minor in History
Renee	Female	2007	Sierra	Junior	Media Director	26	2008	Psychology and Sociology
Marshall	Male	2008	Sierra	Senior	None	29	2008	Psychology
Kelly	Female	2012	Rockies	Sophomore	Business Development Co-Chair	21	2014 (expected)	Psychology; Minor in Spanish; Certificate in Social Entrepreneurship and Nonprofits
Jack	Male	2012	Rockies	Sophomore	Route Equipment Chair	21	2014 (expected)	Mechanical Engineering

Table 1 Continued

Pseudonym	Gender	Ride Year	Ride Route	School Year Leading up to Ride	Leadership Position	Current Age	Graduation Year	Major
Michael	Male	2006	Sierra	Junior	None	29	2008	Geography; Minors in Math, Physics and Electrical Engineering
Judy	Female	2009 *Deferred from 2008	Rockies	Senior	Travel Committee	27	2008	Social Work
Emily	Female	2004	Rockies	Junior	Program, Legal and Media	32	2005	Coordinated Program Nutritional Sciences
Carrie	Female	2009	Rockies	Graduate School	Program Chair	29	2005	M.A. Art Education
Eric	Male	2013	Sierra	Graduate School	Saturday Ride Coordinator	24	2014 (expected)	M.S. Exercise Science
Jenny	Female	2010	Sierra	Senior	Travel Chair	24	2010	Theatre & Dance
Will	Male	2006	Rockies	Junior	Atlas Ride Director and Assistant Ride Director	28	2007	Geography
Anna	Female	2013	Ozarks	Junior	None	21	2014 (expected)	History; Anthropology; Latin American Studies
Thomas	Male	2009	Sierra	Senior	None	27	2009	Plan II Honors/History; Business Honors/International Business
Arthur	Male	2008	Sierra	Sophomore	None	25	2010	Electrical Engineering

Table 1 Continued

Pseudonym	Gender	Ride Year	Ride Route	School Year Leading up to Ride	Leadership Position	Current Age	Graduation Year	Major
Rick	Male	2009	Rockies	Senior	None	26	2009	Plan II Honors; Mathematics; Government
Diane	Female	2009	Rockies	Senior	PR Leader	27	2009	Corporate Communication
June	Female	2011	Sierra	Senior	Recruitment Chair & Ride Director	25	2011	Psychology
Charlie	Male	2009	Sierra	Senior	Equipment Chair	33	2009	Human Development & Family Sciences, Early Childhood Concentration
Robin	Female	2009	Rockies	Sophomore	No	26	2011	Social Work, Business Foundations
Calvin	Male	2007	Rockies	Staff Member	No	37	2001	Computer Science (from another university)
Olivia	Female	2010	Rockies	Senior	No	25	2010	Marketing and Spanish
Steven	Male	2008	Rockies	Graduate School	No	30	2008	Electrical Engineering
Joseph	Male	2010	Rockies	Junior	Media and Public Relations Committee Chair	28	2013	Government
Alexander	Male	2009	Rockies	Sophomore	Finance Committee Member	25	2011	Economics and Government

Table 2: Summary of Alumni Background Information

Gender			
Male	15	Female	17
Ride Year			
2004	1	2005	0
2006	2	2007	2
2008	4	2009	8
2010	4	2011	3
2012	5	2013	3
Route			
Rockies	17	Sierra	14
Ozarks	1		
Leadership Positions Represented			
Business Development Committee		Media Director	
Equipment Committee		Travel Committee	
Finance Chair		Program Coordinator	
Saturday Ride Coordinator		Media and Public Relations Chair	
Atlas Ride Director		Assistant Ride Director	
Equipment Chair		PR Leader for Route	
Program Chair		Program, Legal, and Media Chair	
Travel Chair		Business Development Co-Chair	
Assistant Ride Director		Equipment Chair	
Fitness Chair		Finance Chair	
Recruitment Chair		Ride Director	
12 Participants had no Leadership Role			
School Year during Year Leading up to Ride			
Freshman	2	Sophomore	4
Junior	8	Senior	14
Graduate School	3	Staff Member	1

Appendix A-Alumni Recruitment E-mail

Hello,

My name is Amy Rundio, and I am currently working with Texas 4000 on a research project to examine the impact of participating in Texas 4000 on participants' (that's y'all!) lives. Below you will find information on the purpose of the study, what will be asked of you, and your rights as a participant. If you should choose to participate or have any questions, please contact me at (352) 697-0742 or rundioa@utexas.edu.

Thank you for your consideration of participation in this project; my hope is that I can work with Texas 4000 to help them to continue to provide a quality experience for participants and alumni.

Sincerely,

Amy Rundio
PhD Candidate, Sport Management
Department of Kinesiology and Health Education
The University of Texas at Austin

Identification of Investigator and Purpose of Study

You are invited to participate in a research study, entitled "Cause and Sport: Life Changing Experiences." The study is being conducted by Amy Rundio of The University of Texas at Austin, Department of Kinesiology and Health Education, College of Education, 1 University Station D3700, Austin, TX 78758; (352) 697-0742; rundioa@utexas.edu.

The purpose of this research study is to examine how the experience of participating in Texas 4000 had an impact on your life. Your participation in the study will contribute to a better understanding of the impact of such programs on participants' lives, and help Texas 4000 and other similar programs improve the experience for participants and the program. You are free to contact the investigator at the above address and phone number to discuss the study. You must be at least 18 years old to participate.

If you agree to participate:

- The interview will take approximately 1-2 hours of your time.
- You will be asked questions about why you joined Texas 4000, what your expectations were, what the experience was like, and how the experience has impacted your life.
- You will not be compensated.

Risks/Benefits/Confidentiality of Data

The potential risk to the participants is no greater than everyday life. There will be no costs for participating, nor will you benefit from participating. Your name and email address will not be kept during the data collection phase. A limited number of research team members will have access to the data during data collection. Any identifying information will be stripped from the final dataset, and will not be included in any publications resulting from the research project. However, the results of this study will be used to help Texas 4000 enhance the participation experience for future participants and will further our understanding of the experience and its impacts on participants for other non-profit organizations.

Participation or Withdrawal

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to answer any question and you have the right to withdraw from participation at any time. Withdrawal will not affect your relationship with The University of Texas in anyway. If you do not want to participate either simply stop participating or close the browser window.

If you do not want to receive any more reminders, you may email us at rundioa@utexas.edu.

Contacts

If you have any questions about the study or need to update your email address contact the researcher Amy Rundio at (352) 697-0742 or send an email to rundioa@utexas.edu This study has been reviewed by the Office of Research Support and the study number is **2013-06-0030**.

Questions about your rights as a research participant.

If you have questions about your rights or are dissatisfied at any time with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Office of Research Support by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Thank you.

Please print a copy of this document for your records.

Appendix B: Interview Reminder and Questionnaire

Hi (*Interview Participant Name*),

I am just writing to remind you about your agreement to participate in an interview about your Texas 4000 experience on (*date*) at (*time*). I will contact you via (*Skype or Phone*) OR I will meet you at Belmont 327D on The University of Texas at Austin campus. You will find instructions on how to reach my office and parking at the end of this e-mail.

I also would like to ask you to respond to the following questions, so that we don't have to go over them during the interview, and as a confirmation of your interview:

1. Are you male or female?
2. How old are you? _____ years
3. Did you graduate from the University of Texas at Austin?
 - a. If yes, what year did you graduate?
4. What was your major(s) at the University of Texas at Austin (if you changed majors, please provide the major(s) that you graduated with)?
5. Have you continued your education at the University of Texas at Austin or elsewhere?
 - a. If yes, please list the school and degree program.
6. When did you participate in Texas 4000 (in other words, what was your ride year)?
7. What route did you ride (Sierra, Rockies, or Ozarks)?
8. What year were you (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, grad school) when you participated?
9. Did you have a leadership position on the team?
 - a. If so, what was your position?
10. Please list your 3 most recent jobs, and the length that you held each job (e.g. Elementary School Teacher-2 years).

These questions will not be used to identify you, nor shared with anyone outside of myself and my advisor. They are simply to provide background information about all participants in the study. If you are uncomfortable answering any of the questions, please feel free to leave them blank.

Thanks so much, and please feel free to e-mail or call (352-697-0742) me with any questions, comments or concerns. I look forward to our conversation!

Amy Rudio

Instructions on how to get to Belmont:

My office is located at Belmont 327D (on the West side of the football stadium). Here is a link to the map, with an arrow pointing at Belmont (<http://www.utexas.edu/maps/main/buildings/bel.html>). My office is located on the 3rd floor just to the left of the elevators. But if you give me a call on my cell phone, (352) 697-0742, I will come meet you in front of the building.

There are numerous parking garages on campus, but Manor Garage is closest (on the east side of the football stadium). Here is a link to a map and more information about parking (<http://www.utexas.edu/parking/parking/garages/mag.php>). Unfortunately I do not have the funds to reimburse you for parking, Two hours of parking is \$6, and I do not expect interviews to take longer than this amount of time.

Appendix C: First Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Before Texas 4000

- Can you tell me about why you decided to join Texas 4000?
 - What did you think the organization was about?
 - What was the process to join like?
 - Did you know anyone who had previously participated or was joining your year?
 - How did you feel about joining?
 - What did you expect when you joined?
 - Had you ever done anything similar to what you were expecting?
 - Follow up on anything cycling and cancer-related?

Describing the Experience

- Can you tell me about your experience, once you had officially joined?
 - What happened after you were accepted?
 - Tell me about the activities you participated in (volunteering, training, fundraising). Had you participated in similar activities before?
 - Tell me about your teammates. (How did you feel about your team?) Describe a relationship with someone you were close to/not close to?
 - Describe your feelings at that moment.
 - Give me an example.

- Can you tell me about your favorite two or three things related to participating in Texas 4000? Least favorite two or three things? Please describe/explain.

- Some people described memorable moments during their participation, while others did not find memorable moments. Have you felt that way? What was the most memorable thing you remember about participation throughout the year? What was the most memorable thing about the ride to Alaska? Please explain. Can you describe your emotions?

Impact of Preparations and Participating

- Can you tell me about your transition out of Texas 4000?
 - Did the ride have an impact on anything in your life? How? Does it still have an impact on your life today?
 - Can you give me a tangible/concrete example?
 - Follow up on Learn new things? Feel differently about yourself/change in self-view?
 - How did it match up to your expectations before the ride?
 - Explore preparation vs. actual ride.
 - Explore cause and cycling related answers. Teammates

- Again, I have no affiliation with Texas 4000, and am not soliciting support, but I would like to ask for your honest answer here. Do you still contribute to or participate in Texas 4000 events? If yes, can you describe your involvement please? If no, why not?

- Do you have anything else you would like to share about your experience or participation in Texas 4000?

Appendix D: Edited Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Before Texas 4000

- Can you tell me about why you decided to join Texas 4000?
 - What did you think the organization was about?
 - What was the process to join like?
 - Did you know anyone who had previously participated or was joining your year?
 - How did you feel about joining?
 - What did you expect when you joined?
 - Had you ever done anything similar to what you were expecting?
 - Follow up on anything cycling and cancer-related.

Describing the Experience

- Can you tell me about your experience, once you had officially joined?
 - What happened after you were accepted?
 - Tell me about the activities you participated in (volunteering, training, fundraising). Had you participated in similar activities before?
 - Tell me about your teammates. (How did you feel about your team?) Describe a relationship with someone you were close to/not close to?
 - Describe your feelings at that moment.
 - Give me an example.
- Can you tell me about your favorite two or three things related to participating in Texas 4000? Least favorite two or three things? Please describe/explain.

Impact of Preparations and Participating

- Can you tell me about your transition out of Texas 4000?
 - Did the ride have an impact on anything in your life? How? Does it still have an impact on your life today?
 - Can you give me a tangible/concrete example?
 - Follow up on Learn new things? Feel differently about yourself/change in self-view?
 - How did it match up to your expectations before the ride?
 - Explore preparation vs. actual ride.
 - Explore cause and cycling related answers.
- Again, I have no affiliation with Texas 4000, and am not soliciting support, but I would like to ask for your honest answer here. Do you still contribute to or participate in Texas 4000 events? If yes, can you describe your involvement please? If no, why not?
- Do you have anything else you would like to share about your experience or participation in Texas 4000?
- Can you think of anyone I should talk to about their experience? Who? Why? Would you be willing to share their contact information with me?

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