

# Braking For Minchah

Jewish tradition helps inspire Make-A-Wish cyclists.

Big Rapids, Michigan

**W**earily that Friday following the first leg of a three-day, 300-mile bicycle trek through Michigan to benefit Make-A-Wish, Team Alex quickly regrouped to mark *Minchah*, the afternoon prayer service, and to recall the stirring legacy of team inspiration Alexandra Graham, who died at 17.

Alex — courageous, smart and caring — loved athletics, photography and music. The daughter of Susie and Bill Graham of West Bloomfield, she died in 1999 after a 13-month battle against bone cancer, which caused a leg amputation and partial lung loss. In the midst of great pain, Alex proved it's possible to inspire others.

Her wish was to create a public service announcement encouraging able-bodied kids to smile at other kids who may appear different because of a medical problem or physical limitation.

Make-A-Wish grants wishes to qualifying children (affectionately Wish Heroes) with life-threatening medical conditions. Each wish is something to anticipate and a chance for families with a pediatric medical challenge to rally around.

Team Alex, based in Oakland County, also now rides in memory of 12-year team member Jeffrey Surnow. The West Bloomfield resident died last year at 63 as a result of a bicycling accident in Hawaii.

The can-do spirit of both Alex and Jeff invigorates Team Alex, collectively and individually.

## PRAYERFUL TIMES

Under a late-afternoon sun in the courtyard of a Big Rapids motel on Friday, July 29, Team Alex, under longtime captain Beth Brandvain of Farmington Hills, gathered, nearly 160 strong.

The team has become more diverse over its 18 (*chai*) years, but remains largely Jewish. To mark this *chai* year, the team enhanced Jewish components over Make-A-Wish's Wish-A-Mile (WAM) course, including the Friday blessing of a challah made by Davida Robinson of Franklin. She, her husband, Warren, and



**Team captain Beth Brandvain**



**First-year rider David Saperstein with Wish Hero Sophie Blumberg at the Heroes Hurrah**

Brandvain are all 18-year WAM riders. Third-year rider Jay Levinson of West Bloomfield led that day's *Minchah* minyan for those saying the Mourner's Kaddish — an example of Team Alex "helping each other as family," as Davida put it.

First-year rider David Saperstein of Huntington Woods delivered the *drash*, interpreting that week's Torah portion, *Pinchas*.

"We learn that perhaps the legacy of Moses is one of political leadership and continuity, a leadership that is not inherited at birth, but is earned by merit — illustrated by Joshua, Moses' successor, having learned in the tent of Moses," Saperstein said.

He asked teammates to "look around at each other."

"Alex left us with a legacy that continues in the actions of all of us," he said. "Perhaps as we are riding this weekend, we can remember her legacy, also recalling the legacy that Jeff left — then contemplate what we can do to improve our own legacy."

Alex's mother, Susie, said: "This ride is what Judaism is about. There is just no way to fully express how grateful Bill and I are to our loving community for keeping Alex's memory and legacy alive."



**Jeff Surnow**

## PEDAL POWER

Later, Jeff Surnow's brother, Michael, a 15-year rider from West Bloomfield, talked about slowing down along the picturesque WAM course and no longer approaching it as a race.

"Maybe I'm just 15 years older and my body is beaten down by the passing years and by the vagaries of life itself, which forces a new resolve," he said. "I think it's simply contentment — satisfied to be out there, not caring about the time, feeling a glow from the warm smiles of our Wish Heroes. Enjoying all that my senses can upload makes me happy."

Team Alex began in 1999 with 14 riders raising almost \$46,000. The team is now the largest organized entrant in the WAM summer tour — from Traverse City on Lake Michigan to Brooklyn, west of Chelsea. Team Alex raised \$387,000 toward WAM's 2016 yield of \$2.31 million. Over 18 years, the team has raised about \$3.8 million, enough to help fulfill about 400 wishes.

Team Alex not only sports wristbands with the names of Alex and its current Wish Heroes, but string bracelets fashioned by Wish Hero Sophie Blumberg, 12,



**From right: Michael Surnow with brother Jeff's son Max of Birmingham, a six-year rider, and two other nephews, second-year rider Gabe Scharg of West Bloomfield and first-year rider Jordan Scharg of Denver.**



**18-year riders Warren and Davida Robinson**

of Farmington Hills and her mom, Mindy.

Whether tackling the main 300-mile course or the one-day, 50-mile variation, Team Alex capped WAM with a lap around Michigan International Speedway. There, Team Alex's Wish Heroes served up medals and hugs at the Heroes Hurrah. Statewide, WAM drew 1,000 registrants.

Just before the finish, riders passed the silent mile. Placards along the grass remembered fallen Wish Heroes and WAM ambassadors, including Alex Graham and Jeff Surnow.

Reminiscing this *chai* year since losing Alex, Susie Graham shared this pensive thought with the *JN*: "Alex would have been 35 this past May. I do wonder what she might have been doing and how her life might have turned out.

"But," Susie added, "we really couldn't ask for a better steward of Alex's life than Team Alex." ✨



**Alex Graham**

In 2008, Three Dot LLC of Northville published *When One Door Closes: A Teen's Inspiring Journey and Lasting Legacy* by Susie and Bill Graham, with H. Thomas Saylor.