

More pictures and information are available at www.spoke-n-word.org and at www.montlasalle.org.



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Among the 144 participants were 40 youth, 20 Lasallian Volunteers, 12 Brothers, and one baby.

The sixty days of traveling included many rest stops and flat tires, lots of laughter, a number of "Baiku" poems, and the discovery of real community.

Spoke-n-Word: Riding for Family Literacy

Writer: Brother George Van Grieken, FSC

You are probably not very surprised that you can read this. Literacy is something that most of us take for granted. Yet in the United States alone there are over 40 million adults who function at the lowest of five recognized literacy levels. In many of our biggest cities, the functional illiteracy level is twice the national norm – in Chicago and Philadelphia, for example, one out of every three adults is functionally illiterate. As members of an organization whose avowed mission is providing education, we recognize that the Founder's words are still true: "The need for this Institute is very great."

During the summer of 2001, Lasallian educators and their supporters across the country stepped out of the classroom and onto the road in order to promote family literacy and to raise funds for local literacy programs in San Miguel Schools and Lasallian Urban Learning Centers across the nation. For sixty days and 4,000 miles, men and women of all ages joined together to bicycle on country roads, interstates, city streets and highways. Beginning at De La Salle North Catholic High School in North Portland, riders as young as 15 and as old as 84 joined in for part or all of a journey that would visit Lasallian schools in major urban areas and end its pilgrimage at the San Miguel School in Providence, Rhode Island.

This was a mobile Lasallian community on a bicycle ride across the United States, a community whose mission was the promotion of family literacy by spoke and by word. Staying at campgrounds, city parks, church basements and school gymnasiums, these men

and women – numbering from 15 to 30 according to their time commitments – would bicycle an average of 70 miles a day and then spend time in the evening speaking with others about family literacy.

On one of the days early in the ride, we rode into a very small country town and found the county fairgrounds where we would be staying for the night. Upon our arrival, we noticed that one member of our group had arrived earlier and was seated on the grass surrounded by a group of kids who were avidly listening to him read from a cowboy novel. After a while, he asked one of the older children to read a bit from the book, giving her the book as a gift at the end of the session, a book that she then asked all of us to autograph. In ways such as this, opportunities to promote family literacy came about.

A number of times, the group found itself being hosted by a church group or a local family who provided both a place to stay and a wholesome dinner. Toward the end of the dinner, we would often begin an open discussion about some aspect of literacy. What do you remember as being important in your early literacy growth? Who was it that helped you become literate, and how did that happen? What would we have to do in order to improve the state of family literacy in this particular community? Through questions such as these, our own literacy and that of others became something to be appreciated and supported. The very fact of our literacy became almost as amazing as the fact of this bicycle ride itself.



The most striking aspect of the trip was the people that we met. There were the characters, of course, such as the four lively octogenarian ladies in Upton, Wyoming, who dubbed themselves as the Wild Widows of Wyoming, and the elderly wood-crafter in Oregon who makes hobby-horses that look like Harley-Davidson motorcycles and has a mannequin in a bathtub in front of his house waving at those passing by. But there were mostly ordinary folks who, more often than not, openly shared their homes, their history, and their gifts with us.

Each rider, whether riding for 5 miles or 4,000 miles, became a sign of faith for others and in turn was touched by others. It was through the real connections that were made during the course of this ride that the long-term rewards of family literacy also came to the surface, since it is through literacy that one is able to connect to the world of others.

At one campground, a university professor staying there with students who were digging for fossils, took out a bagpipe and played across the quiet fields and mountains as the sun set. At several churches, the Knights of Columbus arrived early in the morning to make us a full breakfast and send us on our way. Hardly a day went by without our experiencing the kindness of strangers in some form or other.

Several aspects of this adventure were crucial to its success. Our common passion for education and the Lasallian mission enabled a wide variety of personalities to become a real community. Extremely generous support personnel (scouts, van drivers, RY support, and so on) allowed the riders to concentrate on riding their bicycles. For example, Paul and Helen Thomas accompanied

the group during the entire ride with their RY, providing each day's lunch oasis and evening cool spot. Every day, the group met in the evening for a community meeting, led by rotating volunteers, during which we spoke about the day's highs and lows, any community issues, the following day's planned ride, and prayer intentions. Finally it was the good will, generosity, and experience of the participants themselves that allowed the ride's focus to remain on the cause of family literacy.

Riders were asked to raise \$1 for every mile they rode. In the end, more than \$120,000 was raised in support of family literacy programs and projects across the country. Yet the greater reward reaches much more deeply than the financial picture reveals. Each rider, whether riding for 5 miles or 4,000 miles, became a sign of faith for others and in turn was touched by others. It was through the real connections that were made during the course of this ride that the long-term rewards of family literacy also came to the surface, since it is through literacy that one is able to connect to the world of others. And in the world of education, it is those kinds of connections that form the substance of one's work.

Lasallian educators promote literacy on a daily basis through their interactions and conversations with others. In a very real way, the Spoke-n-Word cross-country bicycle ride happens every day in each of our schools, albeit in a different format. If the experience of 60 days is any indication, opportunities to promote literacy are around each bend in the road. We just have to take time to rest after a long vigorous ride, open our personal book, sit on the grass, and read aloud to those who gather around. 📖



Districts, schools, parishes, and individuals provided food, lodging, and financial support.



San Francisco District participants:
 Spencer Cheng, Collin Dong,
 Tom Farrell, Greg Krueger,
 Matt Risse, Jakub Rzepka,
 Gery Short, Cecilia Powers,
 Tony Powers, Mark Powers,
 and
 Brother George Van Grieken, FSC.



All day pedaling
 Get the gears right, keep the pace.
 Roll on hills and wheels!