

Paralyzed Fort Collins cyclist's story inspires race

Written by Stephen Meyers
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FTC0927-sp wandas ride

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Wanda Roche at her Fort Collins home Thursday. Roche is paralyzed from the waist down after a cycling accident in June. / V. Richard Haro/The Coloradoan

Wanda's Ride

• **What:** Benefit ride for Wanda Roche of Fort Collins. In June, Roche was struck by another cyclist in the Bicycle Tour of Colorado, leaving her with spinal injuries and paralyzed from the waist down. • **When:** 9 a.m. • **Distance:** 6-mile, 26-mile, 56-mile • **Where:** Starts and finishes at Lee's Cyclery 931 E. Harmony Road, Fort Collins • **Cost:** Minimum donation of \$60 • **Registration:** www.fccycle.club.org • **Cash donation:** In addition, a support fund has been set up with Chase Bank. Contributions to Roche can be made through www.youcaring.com/medical-fundraiser/wanda-s-ride/70162.

It was routine for Wanda Roche to wake up at 6:30 a.m. during the summer and get in 40 to 60 miles on her Cannondale bike, all before her three teenaged children slumped out of bed by noon.

It was routine for Roche to be up and ready for the day to help send her children to school.

It was routine for Shadow, Roche's 11-year-old black-and-white border collie, to greet her with a toy to play fetch in the morning.

Those routines were turned upside down in a manner of two seconds in a bicycle accident in June that has left the perpetually optimistic Roche paralyzed from the waist down.

"Every morning, mom would throw the ball for him, so he could go out and go to the bathroom," Roche said, tears starting to well in her eyes Thursday morning. "He doesn't even ask me anymore. He gets it. My kids, I talk to them from the bedroom now because I haven't been able to get out of bed yet. This didn't just happen to me. It happened to everyone."

Her life thrown a wrench, Roche, 56, isn't about to feel sorry for herself. The former personal trainer who once did the Double Triple Bypass — cycling 240 miles of 20,000 feet of elevation gain in two days — spent 72 days in rehab at Craig Hospital in Englewood. The single mother has modified her home with a stair glide, wheelchair ramps and a modified shower.

But more modifications to her home and car are needed, and medical bills will continue to pile up on her desk, which she can't yet fit her wheelchair underneath to work.

Her friend, Amy Ehrenberger, and the Fort Collins Cycling Club, organized Saturday's Wanda's Ride to help raise money for Roche's family.

More than 300 people packed Ryan's Sports Bar and Grill, 925 E. Harmony Road, Fort Collins, Wednesday night for a benefit dinner and silent auction dedicated to Roche. Friends, family and dozens of others who don't even know Roche waited in line to shake her hand and share their thoughts and prayers. One man walked up to Roche to share his own personal struggles, Roche said, and said hearing her story had inspired him. Nearly \$14,000 has already been raised.

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"Wanda is extremely strong and determined. She is selfless and encouraging. She has such a great sense of humor and she's able to laugh and enjoy life," Ehrenberger said. "She's like a sister to me, and she has so many people surrounding her who want to do whatever they can to help her. She is an inspiration to so many people."

The accident

There are two photos of Roche and Ehrenberger posing with their bikes atop the summit of 12,126-foot Cottonwood Pass on June 28. The best friends had just reached the highest point of the seven-day Bicycle Tour of Colorado and posed for the photo. It was Day Five of the tour and all downhill from there.

The photos are the last of Roche standing.

Three minutes into the descent on the eastern side of the pass, Roche rode into a hairpin turn going 28 mph. She was in front of her group with her significant other, Francis Fritch, and Ehrenberger about 20 to 30 yards behind.

Faster riders had already sped by the trio, as the three riders usually stayed in the back of the pack. One woman rider bombed down the hill, perhaps going 10-15 mph faster than Roche, and struck Roche from behind, sending her off the road.

"I had a huge impact in my back and the back of my head, and I was flying. I was sailing. To where, I had no idea. I remember looking down at the gravel thinking, 'Why am I not sinking in?' I was going too fast to sink in," Roche said. "I remember looking at a bush thinking, 'Why are you so small you can't slow me down?' I don't remember anything after that bush."

Fritch said the accident looked like the scene in "E.T." where Elliott flies off the sharp ledge of a hill.

Roche fell 30 feet from the road, down a ravine, landing on her Cannondale bicycle, which only suffered damage to the front wheel. Ehrenberger ran down to find Roche, lying faceup in a creek. Her right arm was broken, and she told Fritch she couldn't move her legs.

Eventually, after being loaded in an ambulance and taken farther down the pass, she was airlifted by helicopter to St. Anthony Hospital in Lakewood.

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With two shattered vertebrae, Roche was rushed into surgery where two vertical rods were inserted along her spine, leaving scars from the base of her neck to the middle of her back.

After week and a half in ICU and another week in a regular hospital room, it was time for three months of rehab at Craig Hospital.

"You go for a bike ride, you think you're coming home, and you don't come home for a couple of months. And you don't come home with your feet and legs working. How does that happen?" Roche said. "I want them to work so bad, but they don't."

Love of cycling

Roche started cycling three years ago, after a monthslong bout with meningitis, and immediately fell in love with the sport.

A single mother to Heidi, 19; Preston, 16; and Monique, 13 — cycling was Roche's time to escape. Her time to think. Her time to push herself. Every mile she'd ride, she'd push herself to go one more. She even mounted a toy monkey on her handlebars where she could put his thumb in his mouth.

"When it got tough, I'd say 'Suck it up and pedal,' " she said.

Eventually, cycling was Roche's time to socialize, too.

She met Ehrenberger through the Fort Collins Cycling Club, and the two women immediately bonded like sisters.

"It just clicked. We were in sync. To meet somebody in your 50s that you're just parallel with in life is really rare. I thought I was the most optimistic person until I met Amy. She's amazing," Roche said.

Roche rode the MS 150 and met a rider with multiple sclerosis named Daymond, with whom she has since ridden many times.

On a ride with her friends, Roche approached a rider struggling to get up Bingham Hill west of Fort Collins. It turned out to be Daymond. As her friends passed, Roche stayed behind, talking to Daymond.

"He said this was his third attempt to make it up Bingham. I said, 'Daymond, we'll make it today,' " she said.

The two pedaled together and found Roche's friends waiting at the summit cheering them on as if they were finishing a 100-mile ride. Daymond told Roche he couldn't have made it to the top that day without her help.

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"It was a humbling experience. If biking gave me that, I guess I'm very glad I started riding. It touched me in a way that you can't read in a book and you can't tell somebody," Roche said.

The road ahead

Roche doesn't want to dwell on June 28. It's wasted energy to think about the past, she said.

Sure, she misses the wind on her face and the sun on her back. A pop-up trailer sits in her driveway, unused as camping trips this summer had to be canceled. The to-do list for what's next changes every day, Fritch said.

Until an accessible sink is built in her home, she can't wash both of her hands at the same time.

Nearly every 10 minutes, she has to rotate and shift her weight in her wheelchair. She acknowledges that everything in her life has changed, not only for her, but also for the loved ones around her.

But Roche said she's gained something, too.

A new appreciation for what she once had. A new compassion and appreciation for others also living in a wheelchair. A new appreciation for life. An appreciation and optimism for the immense challenge ahead.

"People's hearts hurt for me, but I'm pretty tough. I don't look back. It's a new world," Roche said.

"Every time I've seen someone in a wheelchair, I've just seen someone who could not walk. That is so not true. I wouldn't have known. Every part of their being has changed. It's just the way it is. I lived a very sheltered life and so did my kids. I think this is going to teach my kids compassion a lot. You can't teach it by telling them about it."

"I may look different, but I'm still the same mom."

Xplore reporter Stephen Meyers covers the outdoors and recreation for the Coloradoan. Follow him on Twitter @stemeyer or Facebook.com/ meyersreports.