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For second year, Pablove Across America ride unites racing, music communities

By Neal Rogers

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After three weeks spent pedaling down the west coast, through sunshine, rain and wind, Jeff Castelaz unclipped from his bike for the last time last Thursday at the Sunset Boulevard headquarters of two organizations he's co-founded — Dangerbird Records and The Pablove Foundation.

Surrounded by friends, family, colleagues, riders and news crews, Castelaz had finished the second annual Pablove Across America ride. Once again, he'd accomplished his goal — to raise awareness and funds for childhood cancer — with support from the music, cycling and cancer communities.

Two hours later in the lobby of Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, Castelaz met up with Mötley Crüe bassist Nikki Sixx. They spent three hours with cancer patients at the hospital, talking about bikes, chemo, and taking photos with Sixx's Polaroid

camera. While the kids were focused on the rocker's tattoos, Castelaz would step aside with the parents and speak about Pablove's mission.

This was a typical day in the life of Pablove Across America.

A year has passed since Castelaz first rode his bike across the U.S. in an effort to process his son Pablo's death from cancer while also raising funds for pediatric cancer research and treatment.

After Pablo succumbed to Wilms Tumor, a rare form of childhood cancer, in June 2009, just six days after his sixth birthday, Castelaz and his wife Jo Ann Thraikill resolved to do what they could to help those facing pediatric cancer, establishing the foundation. The organization's mission is twofold: to fund pediatric cancer research and to support activities such as play, art, reading and music for cancer kids in hospitals.

"Cancer treatment turns your life into a medical schedule," says Castelaz. "We want kids with cancer to still be kids — 'play' has to be on that medical schedule if you're five years old."



On the



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research side, The Pablove Foundation has assembled a scientific advisory board comprised of eight pediatric oncologists and researchers from places like Harvard, Duke, Texas Childrens and CHLA. Based on their recommendations, the foundation will award two \$50,000 research grants in April 2011.

The first Pablove Across America ride, which had originally been intended as a celebration of Pablo's beating cancer, evolved into something else — a cathartic fundraising event intended to fuel a childhood cancer research fund and put a spotlight on the plight of childhood cancer.

That ride, from St. Augustine, Florida, to Pablo's grave at Forest Lawn Cemetery in the Hollywood Hills, raised \$250,000 and caught the attention of the cancer community's biggest name, Lance Armstrong, who joined along when the route passed through Austin, Texas.

In November 2009 Castelaz was featured as ABC News' "Person of the Week."

This year's 1,425-mile ride, from Seattle to Los Angeles has raised \$810,000; on October 20 the foundation received its biggest donation to date, a \$500,000 contribution from a family who have asked to be identified only as "Anonymous Friends of Pablo"

Armstrong and his RadioShack teammate Levi Leipheimer also contributed, with Leipheimer joining Castelaz and his rotating crew of riding partners for a leg of the ride on Highway 1 in Point Reyes, California.

That rotating crew also featured Ben Harper and the Innocent Criminals guitarist and "Mike and the Bike" author Michael Ward and former 7-Eleven pro Roy Knickman, whose son Andreas is in cancer treatment at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, where Pablo was treated.

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Along the route the Pablove crew dedicated daily "stages" to different children battling cancer, and frequently stopped at children's hospitals, such as the Lucile Packard Childrens Hospital in Palo Alto, where Castelaz handed the management a check for the Child Life program.

One year later

In many ways, much has changed over the past year for Castelaz. Though his wounds are still fresh, he is further along in the grieving process, and the foundation he and Thrailkill started has taken on momentum, in terms of both finance and recognition. Dangerbird Records, the label Castelaz owns, has also grown, representing top indie rock acts such as Silversun Pickups, Hot Hot Heat and Sea Wolf. Dangerbird band Fitz and The Tantrums can be heard on a current HTC phone commercial, bringing Castelaz's music-cycling overlap full circle.

"When we got home last year I went back to work full time on December 1," Castelaz said. "The ride did what it was supposed to — it was cleansing, a great spiritual equalizer. Of course nothing, as far as I know, is going to bring my son back; I could ride my bike around the world ten times, it won't change that. But as far as burning off that emotional hurt and confusion and emptiness, I replaced that with adrenaline and endorphins, just living in a bubble for six weeks where it was all about riding and hanging out with cancer kids.

"I went back to work, where stress and intensity was waiting for me," he continued. "I still had my commitment to my colleagues and my artists, and it was very intense reintegrating. I've really had my head down all year since then, cranking away on signing bands, restructuring the company, and launching Dangerbird 2.0 internally."

In comparison to the inaugural event, which came together quickly following Pablo's death, the second Pablove Across America ride was a well-oiled machine.

"As an organization we benefitted greatly from last year's ride," Castelaz said. "We built the name and got our mission into people's hearts and minds. Being on the road for six weeks, from coast to coast, gave us a lot of traction with people."

This year's route was reduced from six weeks to three weeks, and from a cross-country trek to a coastal passage with 18 days of riding.

"A three-week footprint is easier to deal with, logistically," Castelaz said. "We took six weeks last year, but it was a special situation. Pablo had just passed away. I still wasn't in work mode. I had to do it."

Planning for the 2010 ride commenced 10 months out, with overhead costs fully covered by corporate contributions. As with last year, Castelaz received an outpouring of support from the music industry, including several benefit concerts and radio appearances, providing exposure and fundraising.

With help from Velo Pasadena owner Hrach Gevrikyan, Castelaz reached out to the cycling industry, landing sponsorships from TIME, Giro, Capo, Craft, Showers Pass and PROBAR. Ward made an introduction Dario Pegoretti, who in turn asked Fizik to make custom Pablove saddles. And as was the case last year, SRAM provided a Neutral Race Support vehicle, complete with two-way radio between riders and cars, as well as SRAM-equipped Red gruppos and Zipp carbon 404 wheels.

The crew also included soigneurs Kurt Marion and Stan Barrett, with Castelaz's good friend Rick Babington providing coaching, and Rick's wife Jan, who is working on her Ph.D. in exercise physiology, focusing on the riders' nutritional needs.

"We looked and operated like a professional cycling team," Castelaz said. "Over 20 riders joined us for a week each, and everyone wears Pablove kits. We rode organized, two-up, in rotating pace lines. Even Levi said, 'Man, you guys are strong.'"

That strength manifested itself in different ways along the ride, and on at least one occasion, Castelaz said he rode with the strength of two.

Standing at the side of the road near Cape Perpetua after a group nature break on October 5, looking out at the ocean, Castelaz said he could feel Pablo's presence. The next thing he knew he was riding off the front of his group, alone, for almost 80 miles.

"I looked out at ocean, and had this feeling of Pablo being with me," he said. "I stood there looking out at the vast, unending ocean, just wondering, 'where does this all go, where does it end? And what am I doing on this earth?' That perpetual feeling was exactly what was coursing through my veins. I started pedaling, dropped a few gears and took off, and I never turned back. My jaw was clenched, I was hammering and also literally weeping on the bike, snot flying everywhere, holding 400 watts for long stretches of beautiful Oregon blacktop.

"There is a time for sorrow, and it catches up with you in different ways," he continued. "That's what happened that day. I was possessed, I really had a spiritual experience."

Eighteen months after Pablo's death, with two epic rides and over \$1 million raised, Castelaz's passion for his foundation continues to burn, fueled by an emptiness he knows will never be filled, but pacified, in part, by pedaling through the pain.

For more information on The Pablove Foundation, visit www.pablove.org. To follow Castelaz on Twitter, see twitter.com/pablovejw/



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