The Journey of Hope

by Margaret French

Last summer an OU student from Denmark pedaled his bicycle nearly 3,600 miles to raise awareness and funds for children with disabilities.

It sounds like an outline for the requisite essay, "How I Spent My Summer Vacation."

Pedal a bicycle nearly 3,600 miles coast-to-coast in 63 days, averaging 75 miles a day. Stop in several cities along the way to construct playground equipment for children with disabilities. See the country. Make dozens of new friends. Contribute to a good cause.

Now that is a summer. Sound far-fetched? Not to University of Oklahoma international business and finance major Peter Rasmussen.

Himself the beneficiary of philanthropic goodwill, Rasmussen came to OU from Denmark via Thanks to Scandinavia Inc., a national scholarship program bringing Scandinavian students to American universities as a way of thanking the countries that rescued Jews during the Holocaust. The OU phase, the program's largest, was endowed in 1980 by longtime OU donor Alan Greenberg, head of the Wall Street firm of Bear Stearns. Rasmussen is one of 60 students to attend the University on a Thanks to Scandinavia grant since 1980.

"I have had so many good experiences at OU," says Rasmussen, who carried the flag of his Danish homeland in President David Boren's September inaugural procession.

A member of OU's chapter of the national social fraternity Pi Kappa Phi, Rasmussen decided to participate in The Journey of Hope, a cross-
country bicycle tour sponsored by PUSH America, his fraternity's philanthropy.

Founded in 1977 as the country's only fraternity-sponsored national charity, PUSH America combines service, volunteerism, education and awareness to benefit people with disabilities. Through several annual fund-raising efforts, the organization's 6,000 undergraduate members from 145 campuses have raised more than $3 million—more than any single college organization for any philanthropy—for PUSH America's programs, projects and grants.

PUSH America incorporates:
- PUSH Camp, where students—during college spring break—renovate summer camps for the disabled;
- Camp Courageous, a network of camps for disabled children where fraternity members spend summers as counselors;
- Give-A-PUSH-Weekends, volunteers marshaled to construct accessible playgrounds and environs;
- Kids on the Block, puppet shows designed to help children understand and accept the world of a disabled person; and
- Partnership Grants, to provide funding for adaptive computers, specially designed bicycles and other handicap-friendly equipment.

Finally, The Journey of Hope is a coast-to-coast bicycle trek to raise funds and awareness for the disabled. In 1994 the total raised was $375,000. Rasmussen's group netted $425,000.

When Rasmussen became the first student from Oklahoma to join The Journey of Hope, he came with a background that previously had barely touched on community service through the Special Olympics and Norman's J. D. McCarty Center for Children with Developmental Disabilities.

"I had never really been exposed to people with disabilities, so it was something I wanted to learn," he admits. "I knew I could do the bike ride without any problems, but being around people with disabilities and accepting that they are no different than we are—that was my personal goal."

The 22-year-old Rasmussen was well-qualified for the physical challenge of the ride; he is also a triathlete. At home in Vallensbaek, Denmark, just outside Copenhagen, he competed on the junior national triathlon team in 1.5k swimming, 10k running and 40k bicycling. Even his parents, both employed in banking, are athletes. Dad Flemming is a bicyclist, and mom Lornny is a marathon runner.

Even for triathletes, however, landing a spot on the cross-country bike ride is no cakewalk. The organization accepts only 60 cyclists and carefully considers each applicant's motivation, leadership qualifications, campus activities, athletic skills and fundraising abilities.

Before the ride, each cyclist raises $4,000, which is contributed directly toward the total raised by the event. All room and board expenses are covered by private sponsorship along the road. The cyclist pays only his transportation to San Francisco—where the trip begins after a few days of preliminary planning and getting acquainted—and home from Charleston, South Carolina, where the journey ends.

On a clear day last June, 62 eager volunteers began their 63-day sojourn from the Golden Gate Bridge, stopping first in the lavish wine country. They then cycled into Nevada, where they split into two teams, one traveling south across Nevada, Arizona, Texas and Georgia, the other following the northern route through Utah, Nebraska, Ohio and Maryland. The two groups reunited in Summersville, South Carolina, and rode into Charleston, where a Pi Kappa Phi leadership conference was held that year.

Accompanying each contingent was a caravan of six Saturn-sponsored vans interspersed among the cyclists, never more than 5 to 7 miles away, providing food, water and troubleshooting for problems that included medical and mechanical emergencies, and, of course, the dreaded flat tires. In that category, Rasmussen broke the standing trip record with 45.

"I don't know why I had so many flats," he laments, recounting miserable teasing from his comrades. "I had a brand new bike sponsored by Miller's Cycle and Fitness Center in Norman. I think I was just unlucky and hit all the bad spots in the road."

Fraternity members also served as van drivers and managed other tasks—making hotel, motel and restaurant reservations, handling public relations and media coverage and other duties arising during the well-organized event. One person arranged for mail service, coordinating seven or eight mail drops at many of the larger hotels. Despite their integral roles, several of the drivers are planning to bike next year, Rasmussen says, because they "didn't quite feel as much a part of the process."

Not all their nights were spent in hotels; the cyclists slept in an opera house, a mission, the field house at Bowling Green University, a dormitory at Pittsburgh University and on a sugar plantation. They also camped out and even spent one night in a plush Ritz-Carlton Hotel. Saturn automobile dealerships across the country provided countless lunches.

In larger cities, the bikers were given a day off from the road for sightseeing and to publicize the project by visiting rehabilitation facilities and community centers. Along the way they presented 11 or 12 scholarships of $1,000-to-$3,000 for children's education and new equipment at rehabilitation centers.

They also presented the puppet show four or five times weekly, either in neighborhood parks or community centers. The group members frequently accompanied the disabled children to local swimming pools or water parks.

Rasmussen's party took the picturesque northern route, crossing Nevada and Utah and into Colorado. There the old expression about "a cold day in July" became reality as snow fell on the group on Independence Day as they passed through Denver.

Rasmussen, who noted that the first two weeks were the hardest, cast his vote for the summer snowstorms—there were four altogether—as the trip's worst experience, which left him with bronchitis on one day off.

"It was snowing one morning as we started out—when it was 18 to 20 degrees—and we had to go up over 11,379 feet. I'm used to it back home, but there we would have had appropriate clothes for it. We had plastic bags over our hands and shoes. It was miserable."

An unexpected bonus, however, was the appearance of Bruce Rogers, the
Pi Kappa Phi member who started the bicycle tour in 1988, when he biked alone from his Seattle home to Chicago. Now a Colorado resident, Rogers rode with the group on July 4th.

Leaving the bitter cold, tortuous Rocky Mountains behind, the cyclists bisected Nebraska during the summer heat wave that killed record numbers of people across the midwestern states.

"For five days in Nebraska, each day was 100 to 120 degrees, and we traveled 95 to 115 miles a day," Rasmussen remembers.

But the group pressed on. No one faltered. No one dropped out.

In Grand Island, Nebraska, the group visited handicapped children who had been abused by their parents and subsequently adopted by new families.

"No one wanted to leave that day," Rasmussen says. "You saw smiles on those kids' faces, and that was what kept you going. Then, even when things got tough, there was no way you would quit."

In Omaha a similar experience raised their spirits.

"At a dance for handicapped children, twin girls hugged each one of us. Every single guy left that dance with tears in his eye. We had no idea they would have that effect on us."

In Iowa they visited a Camp Courageous.

"We got to see firsthand what the whole PUSH America Foundation is all about," Rasmussen says. "We were part of raising the funds and making people aware of the program as well."

They progressed from the Iowa cornfields and covered bridges into Illinois—where not even a stolen wallet could dampen Rasmussen's high opinion of Chicago—through Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Maryland and into Washington, D.C., a trip highlight for everyone, he remembers. A police escort for the entire day, from Gaithersburg, Maryland, into Washington, D.C., where they were greeted by cheering crowds and media, created an atmosphere Rasmussen says he will never forget.

"It was so special for me," he recalls. "I had goosebumps all over, it was so incredible—but I could see how special it was for the Americans. I could see they were so excited riding into their capital, having this kind of public support and awareness. It was such a thrill coming into town knowing we had accomplished what we started 63 days before."

Another thrill for the young Dane was the arrival of his parents, who joined him in Cleveland and drove along with the cyclists for the last leg of the trip. In Uniontown, Pennsylvania, Flemming Rasmussen hopped on a bike and rode with his son for three days—197 miles through the Appalachian Mountains to Gaithersburg, Maryland—while Peter's mother filmed the entire event.

The cyclists, including Peter Rasmussen, right, and his friend from Seattle, John Dickerson, had a police escort into Washington, D.C., where they were met by cheering crowds and the media—an experience they will never forget.

The closing ceremonies were held at the annual Pi Kappa Phi leadership convention in Charleston. The event was attended by 1,500 undergraduate members, some of whom traveled from Norman.

Rasmussen insists that The Journey of Hope has changed him forever.

"I will do a lot more for people with disabilities when I go back home. Every day of that trip still is very strong in my memory."

In November Rasmussen joined another benefit bike ride, AXA World Ride, that stopped in Oklahoma City en route around the world. The Scandinavian deems that event "an even more incredible experience," because several disabled people actually participated in the expedition.

"It was so incredible seeing them accomplish the 142-mile day that I rode with them to Tulsa, along old highway 66. The longest day we had (on the PUSH ride) was 115 miles in Nebraska, and we rode 3,600 miles; these people did 13,000 miles around the world!"

This summer, Rasmussen will be interning in The Federal Reserve Bank of Denmark before returning for his final semester at OU in the fall. Although he will be unable to participate in the next Journey of Hope, Rasmussen will be there in spirit. He already is helping Jimmy Battiste, his fraternity "little brother," train for the event that provided his Danish friend with so much satisfaction.

"It's a pretty good goal to take off a summer and finish 3,600 miles," Rasmussen says, shrugging off the suggestion that the time could have been spent earning money for his final semester or finishing his education. "Other guys might have seen it as a sacrifice; I certainly did not. I personally developed a lot during that trip and had the summer of a lifetime. It was incredible."