

From Austin to Alaska

Katy adventurer Nadia Nadesan cycles 4,000 miles for cancer research

Written by Ella Hearrean | Photography by Juliana Evans

The most athletic thing I did in high school was [physical education],” says former Cinco Ranch High School student Nadia Nadesan with a laugh. So after she applied for Texas 4000, an organization of University of Texas students whose efforts to fight cancer culminate in an annual 4,000-mile bike ride from Austin to Alaska, Nadesan was surprised to learn she had been accepted. “I was terrified,” she remembers. “I thought I’d be kicked off the team before we even started.”

Intense Training

In addition to an already full load of classes and work, Nadesan committed to six months of intense training and raised over \$4,500 for cancer research. A double major in anthropology and film, she also minored in South Asian studies, worked part-time as an IT assistant, and served as Texas 4000’s media/public relations chair. “The rides became increasingly harder, but they were actually a nice break from the freak-out, caffeinated cycle of college,” she says.

An Uphill Journey

Several months into training, the team of 20 bikers was dealt a devastating blow: One of their teammates, 20-year-old Ruel, died of neuroendocrine stomach cancer. He joined the cause in support of his father, who had colon cancer. “Ruel was my first friend on the team,” Nadesan says. “He was always asking, ‘What big plans do you have? They better be big.’”

In June, the cyclists were ready to embark on the 70-day ride to Anchorage, AK. They crossed Texas, rode through isolated Arizona deserts, and endured the hills of Nevada. “Nevada was the worst,” remembers Nadesan. “It was so windy and hilly that we moved at only three miles per hour.”

The cyclists faced many challenges on the way, including wind, rain, heat, dehydration, injuries, busy highways, and more. In Alaska, swarms of mosquitoes greeted them. “We were constantly swatting, even with thick rain gear and mosquito netting,” Nadesan says.

Sharing Memories

As Nadesan crossed the miles, she reminisced. Her mother Janette passed away from breast cancer in 1998 when Nadesan was only 8 years old. “I remember marigolds in the front yard, tulips in the spring. I remember she sewed and painted,” she says. “I’ve lost a lot of memories, but was filled with two months of comfort and shared experiences - the shared understanding of loss.”

Nadesan also gained a deeper appreciation for her mother on the road. “When I had back pain, I thought about how my mom lived every day with pain, but still came to my dance recitals and gymnastics practices. Where did her reserves of strength come from when she made dinner at night?” she wonders.

When the team finally crossed the finish line in August, Ruel’s mother was among the crowd who cried, cheered, and hugged the riders. The team carried Ruel’s ashes on the journey. “It was both satisfying and sad,” Nadesan remembers. “I had worked so hard for this moment, and now our time together would end.”

Beyond the Finish Line

After a few weeks recuperating on her parent’s couch, the 23-year-old UT graduate began working as a race coordinator for DNS Visions and is considering returning to school in a few years for a Master’s degree in city planning.

“The finish line is great, but suddenly the bike is gone, the support group is gone, and the goal is gone. Some people feel stuck afterwards,” she says. “I’ve learned there are more important things than the ride, like finding a way in daily life to help people. When I’m loaded with paperwork, when I come home from work tired, I still need to make time for my family.”

Nadesan adds, “I’ve also learned that a big percentage of life is just showing up. That’s what I’m still doing. I’m showing up.” KM

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Nadia Nadesan embarked on a 70-day bike ride from Austin, TX to Anchorage, AK

