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Motorcycle trip is a dream come true for Weymouth man with ALS



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Doug Oakley was diagnosed with ALS in November, and decided he didn't have any time to waste in fulfilling his lifelong dream of completing a "four corners" motorcycle trip. It's a more than 9,000 mile trip across the four corners of the United States. He just got back on Sunday, and it took 25 days. As part of the trip, he raised \$11,000 for Compassionate Care ALS, a Falmouth-based group that assists patients and families coping with the disease.

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By Allison Manning
The Patriot Ledger

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WEYMOUTH — For 25 years, Doug Oakley wanted to ride his motorcycle across the United States, a nearly 9,000-mile ride that would touch all four corners of the country. Each year something came up, or the timing wasn't right, putting the journey on hold for the Weymouth resident.

When he was diagnosed with ALS in November, Oakley realized it was no longer a goal he could put off. His left hand, which is easily fatigued, showed the first signs of the disease. The clutch on the bike is operated on the left side.

"This was the last year to be able to do the trip," he said.

ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, is a neurodegenerative disease affecting nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. As it affects voluntary muscle action, patients may become totally paralyzed.

Life after being diagnosed with ALS is a journey, an uncontrollable one, Oakley said. Prognoses can range from living years with few symptoms to succumbing within six months.

"The statistics aren't good," Oakley, 46, said. "Eighty percent of the people diagnosed pass away within five years."

Oakley, still relatively symptom free, save his left hand, was encouraged by his wife Patty to get going with the trip, which took 25

BY THE NUMBERS

- \$11,360: Money raised to date
- 8,859 miles traveled
- 85 stops for gas
- \$622 cost for gas

WHAT IS ALS?

A progressive neurodegenerative disease affecting nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord.

Degeneration of motor neurons eventually leads to lack of muscle control, paralysis and death.

Can be hereditary or random (Oakley's is random).

Symptoms include muscle weakness in hands, arms and legs, twitching and cramping of muscles, thick speech, and, in advanced stages, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing and swallowing.

Source: ALS Association

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days, with three days of rest. Oakley, riding his Harley-Davidson Road King, arrived home June 7. He left on May 14 from Daytona, Fla.

Paul Zepf, a neighbor from Falmouth where the Oakleys have a summer home, was coerced into riding along. Oakley's brother, Terry, joined in San Diego.

The 22-state journey was grueling physically, but even more mentally, Oakley said. The longest ride was a 14-hour, 630-mile trek from Dallas, Texas, to Santa Fe, N.M.

It was an emotional journey, as well, said Oakley. He was riding not only for himself, but for a cause, raising money for [Compassionate Care ALS](#), a Falmouth organization

that supports patients, caregivers and families affected by ALS.

To date, he has raised nearly \$12,000. On June 26, there will be a benefit for Oakley and Compassionate Care ALS at the Weymouth Elks at 7:30 p.m., featuring music and a silent auction.

Ron Hoffman, co-founder of the caregivers group, said Oakley's trip was extraordinary.

"Doug had not been diagnosed that long and for him to undertake such a physically strenuous undertaking along with the knowledge of what he's doing it for, is really, really huge," Hoffman said.

Along the way, Oakley visited with three ALS patients in Florida, Louisiana and Texas, each at different stages of the disease. One woman was in intensive care.

Visiting patients was like looking into a crystal ball, Oakley said.

"You get back on the motorcycle, and you're thinking, 'Wow,'" he said. "The thing with this disease is you don't know how fast it's going to progress."

Oakley also kept a [daily blog](#), which he wrote in his head during 10-hour days on the bike.

Three elementary schools – in West Bridgewater, where his wife is superintendent of schools, Brockton and Santa Fe, N.M. – followed Oakley's journey, using his travels to study math and geography.

While he's not sure what the next few years, or even few months, will bring, Oakley is focused on making the most of what he has, traveling, skiing and, of course, riding his Harley.

"It was the trip of a lifetime," he said.

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