

Parents Pedal Cross Country for a Cause

Daughters' tragic experiences inspire these dads to carry a message by taking "the ride of their lives".

BY KAREN BOUGHTON SIEGELMAN

Since Ahmad Rivazfar and Ed Smart are both fathers of daughters they are well aware of the strength of that special family bond.

These two men also know how unbearable it is when the ties between a father and daughter are severed by ruthless criminal acts.

In 1988 Rivazfar's two daughters, Sayeh and Sara, who were 6 and 8 years old at the time, were taken from their Florida home. Their mother's boyfriend raped them and cut their throats. Sayeh survived, while Sara did not.

In 2002 Ed Smart's daughter, Elizabeth, was kidnapped from her Utah home. She was found nine months later and a man who had been hired by the Smarts was charged with her abduction.

In the years since these horrifying experiences occurred, Rivazfar and Smart have chosen to get involved in causes that are dedicated to preventing crimes against children. One of these organizations is the Surviving Parents Coalition



Ahmad Rivazfar

which engages in political lobbying and public awareness campaigns. Along with other members of this organization, these two fathers spend much of their time in Washington D.C. advocating for laws to protect children.

Almost three years ago Rivazfar and Smart met through their work with Surviving Parents Coalition and Smart said it was an "instant connection."

"We are members of a club that no one wants to belong to," commented Smart, "but we are also connected in that we both were given the gift of having a daughter returned to us. When I met Ahmad I felt like I had an instant brother."

"We felt like we had known each other all of our lives," added Rivazfar.

These two friends share an intense commitment to supporting causes that keep children safe from sexual abuse and abduction. With their Surviving Parents colleagues they are working on a number of legislative and educational initiatives. These include the Adam Walsh Act, which would require better tracking of sex offenders; and the Protect Our Children Act, which would increase funding and coordination for the Internet Coalition Task Force, which investigates child pornography crimes. In addition they are pushing State Legislators to require that DNA samples will

be taken, along with fingerprints, when a person is charged with a felony. Thus far 21 states have this requirement in place.

In addition Rivazfar and Smart are urging communities to get involved in the Comprehensive Child Safety Initiative called "Not One More Child", a collaborative program with RADKIDS and Samantha's Pride programs where volunteers are trained to be on the lookout for

suspicious people or situations. RADKIDS is a safety education program that provides children with the skills to "resist aggression defensively", said Smart.

To build a stronger awareness of these initiatives, Rivazfar and Smart have decided to take a bicycle ride across the United States, beginning August 21 in Rochester and ending September 22 in Los Angeles. Their journey, called The Ride For Their Lives, will include stops in 33 cities along the way.

Although Rivazfar has bicycled hundreds of miles for many worthwhile causes over the past ten years, and Smart has done some long distance bike riding, the pair admit this adventure will certainly be the ride of their lives.



Ed Smart

"Our passion will give us the energy we need," said Rivazfar. "It is a means to an end, getting an important message out there, fighting for what should be."

Both men have an overwhelming desire to reach out to other parents through this cross country trek and the other causes they are involved in.

"Being silent would be a crime for me," said Ahmed. "This is no other agenda but safety for our children. What happened to my kids could happen to anybody and that is the reason I've been fighting for children causes."

Smart admits that initially when Elizabeth, who is now 22 years old, was found, he "just wanted to try to resume back to the life we had."

However Smart said there were a few



staff photo

In preparation for their cross country bike ride, Ahmad Rivazfar and Ed Smart have been training with cycling fitness expert Scott Page (pictured on left), owner of Full Moon Vista Bike & Sport located on Saint Paul Street in Rochester.

unsettling episodes that occurred which convinced him that more needs to be done to protect children.

"A few months after Elizabeth came home, a man came to our door and asked if he could see her," said Smart. "He claimed he had been involved in searching for her, but something about him made me feel uneasy and I turned him away and called the police immediately. Later on the Sheriff found out the man was a sex offender."

"The Sheriff had been asking me to get involved in the RADKIDS program and I had refused up to this point," continued Smart. "However after a couple of similar incidents I had the Sheriff bring the program into our neighborhood and my children participated in the course. I decided I had to get involved in letting children know that no one has the right to do anything to them."

Throughout the next few months these two committed fathers will be training for The Ride for Their Lives, as well as seeking sponsors and funds to help them in their mission. They are also welcoming teams of individuals to join them as they ride from city to city.

The pair plans to travel 110 miles per day, which will take from 8 to 10 hours to complete. They will be greeted at large welcoming events to be scheduled along the way.

"Our goal is to get many more parents to hear about the important initiatives we are working on," said Smart, "so when we go to Capital Hill we will be bringing all of their support with us. We can accomplish so much more in regard to protecting our children when we speak with one loud voice."

For more information on The Ride for Their Lives and to see how you can get involved go to www.ridefortheirlives.com.