

# ACTIVEfamily

## MAGAZINE

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## Big Hearted Cyclist Outfits Kids with New Bike Helmets

by Michele M. DeLima

Three weeks after her collision with a moving car, cyclist Nancy McBride had a moment of epiphany. As she walked along White Rock Road in Westerly last fall, she happened upon a soccer game. Lots of cars were parked on the street and there was lots of traffic. She saw three boys, third or fourth graders, riding their bikes down the middle of the street without helmets on. Cars were stopping short to avoid hitting them, but nobody said anything. Then Nancy began to yell at them "Get your helmets on! Get out of the road!"

She had good reason to yell. On October 10, 2008, while crossing the intersection of Oak Street and Spuchy Drive in Westerly, Nancy collided into a moving car while riding her bike, hitting her head face-first with sufficient force to dent the car frame before being knocked backwards twenty feet. Doctors told her family to prepare for the worst and to come as quickly as they could. But Nancy unexpectedly survived, because she wore her bike helmet. Though her jaw was crushed and all her teeth were broken, the helmet shielded the top half of her face and brain from injury. Doctors and nurses told her again and again how lucky she was that she wore her helmet; that her helmet saved her life.

As soon as she got home from that fateful walk on White Rock Road, she called Corporal Campbell, the policeman in charge of her accident case. She called the local PTO and Chris Keegan, the Westerly Sun reporter who covered her accident. She called everyone that would help her get an urgent message to kids and parents: bicycle helmets save lives! "I knew at that moment, that the accident wasn't about me. It was about sharing my story of how my bike helmet saved my life."

That afternoon of phone calls snowballed into an all out effort to educate the commu-

nity's parents and kids on the importance of wearing a bike helmet. To give structure to her efforts, Nancy founded H.A.B.S. or Helmet Awareness Bike Safety, a non-profit organization that funds the purchase and distribution of free helmets to kids.

Where does she get the helmets? "John Willis of Ray Willis Toys and Bikes provided me with a contact at Bell Helmet. Through Bell, I can purchase kids' helmets for just \$7.50." Money to purchase helmets comes from private donors, area businesses, and fund raising events. "Both Ray Willis and The Mystic Cycle Centre donated a generous number of helmets to the Westerly helmet drive," Nancy added gratefully.

With the invaluable support of the Westerly PTO and school principals, Nancy and Officer David Turano have made numerous visits to Westerly schools and Arcadia YMCA to talk to kids about bike safety. They have educated hundreds of parents, grandparents, and business owners in Rhode Island and Connecticut. And, to date, have handed out 500 new bike helmets to kids, all free.

"I tell the little kids, 'the people in this community love you so much, we wanted you to have this bike helmet to keep you safe.' When they see me coming, they call me The Helmet Lady," Nancy laughed. "With the middle school kids, it's more about the facts. They get to see my crashed bike and I tell them the hard core facts about my extreme injuries so they understand the reality of what can happen in an accident if you don't wear a helmet...they have to realize that they're not invincible and that they must protect themselves."

Nancy is working with Lisa Konicki, Executive Director of The Greater Westerly-Pawcatuck Area Chamber of Commerce, and Tricia Cunningham, Executive Director of the Greater Mystic Chamber of Com-



Kids always welcome Nancy McBride "The Helmet Lady". Photo by Larry St. Pierre.

merce to organize fund raising events and safety symposiums; several events are in the works. On June 16th, California Pizza Kitchen, located at Foxwoods Resort Casino, is hosting a fundraising event; 20% of sales will be donated to fund kids' helmets and safety education programs.

Nancy is also working with the Mystic and Stonington area PTO's to bring helmet safety awareness to the middle schools and grade schools this fall, along with free helmets for the younger set.

By the way, Nancy recently bought herself a mountain bike and a road bike from Mystic Cycle Centre, as well as a new helmet. Undeterred by her accident, Nancy continues to make cycling a cornerstone of her life, a life bursting with new found energy, a wonderfully helpful network of supporters, and passion for her special mission. "If I can save one child from serious injury, it will be enough."

*If you wish to contribute, please send a check (in memo, write "Helmets") to: Mystic Chamber of Commerce Foundation, P.O. Box 143, Mystic, CT 06355. Contact h.a.b.s@cox.net for more information.*