

**Day Five - Wednesday, 6/25 - St. Joseph’s, Bristol to St. James, Stratford**

Continuing a non-linear approach to my thoughts on our week, I really enjoyed this day, Wednesday, 6/25.  I wasn't with the group on Tuesday, but my wife, Laura and son, Sam graciously drove me and my bike out to Bristol early Wed. to meet back up with you all. Everyone was packing up, finishing breakfast and getting ready to ride.  Fr. Joe spoke some moving and, to me, mysterious words to send us off for the day.  I later heard about the experience you all had on Tuesday in Bristol at the shelter, and at the presentation and in the sharing session.  It is interesting that we had a unique perspective from someone like Fr. Joe who saw us maybe 8 or so years ago, and is now seeing us again and is able to make some observations about the growth of the group.

We were joined by Jim Clifford on this day.  I remember my son, Sam, pushing me literally over to him, "Dad, you've got to introduce yourself."  So Jim has joined our group - and what an acquisition he was!  He comes from Milford via St. James in Stratford, and told us that a couple weeks before the ride his parish was challenged by their Fr. Tom at the Mass of Pentecost to step out of their comfort zone.  Coincidentally, they were advertising for the BTC visit, and Jim decided that riding with us was what he was called to do.  During sharing Wed. evening I was really struck by his honesty.  He spoke about how he was trying to think of any number of excuses to back out from riding with us as the day approached, but that he pushed through with his commitment (a teacher, Jim had his last day the day before at Amity High).  I can relate.  There are still times when I think I'm too busy at work, my lawn needs to be mowed, I'm too tired, whatever, and look for an excuse to ditch a meeting or a day or the weeklong.  But I never regret my choice to be with this group and our mission.

So we leave Bristol, it's humid and somewhat overcast.  We ride out Rt. 229 past ESPN and Lake Compounce and eventually make our way into Southington and the New Haven to Northampton bike path.  We were off and on this all the way into New Haven, through Plantsville, Chesire, Hamden, past Quinnippiac, etc.  It was a strange ride for a couple reasons:  Since we were on the path much of the time, we actually rode very slowly.  We were leisurely riding in twos, talking, going maybe 9-10 mph.  But, we were together (mostly)!  At one point on main roads in Chesire, Bob, Pam and Wayne took a wrong turn, actually missed a right hand turn and went straight (Bob ascended a hill that he probably wished he hadn't!)  Also strange was not seeing any Support vehicles for a couple hours while we were on the trail.  I felt bad that the support team had to take a different route and then wait around for us.  But, the bike path was beautiful.  We saw so many neat and unique things along the way, we all wished Wendy could've been there, she would have had a field day with her camera.  Then somewhere in Chesire or Hamden, I was riding about 3- bike lengths behind Jim when a couple of young ladies on their bikes were riding towards us.  All of a sudden I hear, "Hi Dad!"  It was Jim's daughter and her friend.  What a coincidence, neither knew that the other was going to be on the bike path that day.  We stopped and had introductions all around.  Turns out Jim's daughter is training for the Ride Across Iowa this summer. We ended up seeing them 2 more times on the path that morning.

On the border of Hamden and New Haven we had that outstanding lunch hour that others have written about with Fr. George at St. John the Baptist Church.  Kudos to Steve for cold-calling at the rectory door, explaining our group and mission and getting us the invite.  We only wanted to sit in the shade and have lunch, but Fr. George gave us the full use of the facilities there.  And Claire got us an invite to present there next year!  I snuck into the beautiful old church for a few minutes of quiet time.  Well not entirely quiet, the parish organist was rehearsing, and it was so nice to hear.

Back on the road we rode through New Haven, including the Yale campus and then out to the shore and into West Haven.  Soon we were heading out to the Sound, and at a stop just prior the famous "Chick's" seafood, we saw a lone gentleman carrying his beach chair in back to his car.  Pam recognized him as Brother Larry from St. Gabriel's in Milford!  He said, "I had you guys at my parish a couple years ago."  I remember that very well, having stayed with Br. Larry that evening in 2011.  We continued through Savin Rock (where Br. Larry lives at the rectory of St. John Vianny parish).  It was nice to ride near the ocean, we passed beachgoers and old men playing the bocce ball.  We then passed the newest Sandy Hook playground at the edge of the Savin Rock beach area.  We didn't stop there this day, but did on Thursday morning.  More about that later.  Soon we were in Milford and the sun was shining hot and bright with one town to go.

I had a flat tire back before lunch on the path and was fortunate to have Bob, Johnny and Wayne stop and assist in changing the tire.  What a team!  Unfortunately I still apparently had tiny bits of glass in the tire itself and it went flat again in Milford.  Wendy took me to Tony's bike shop in Milford and I had it fixed and was back on the road, but the group had passed and was approaching Stratford by that time.  We waited by the "6th best funeral home in CT for the 3rd year in a row" (or is it the "3rd best for the 6th year in a row"?!), but I decided to put the bike up and end my riding at 40 miles this day.  Got a great appreciation for the Support team as we searched for the riders, and had to figure out directions, make a couple of turn-arounds and heard Wendy and Steve talking back and forth on the phone.  I think a day of doing this would leave me more mentally exhausted than the physical fatigue I get from being on a bike.  What a group we have doing this with us!  Wendy even stopped and got me a Dunkin' Donuts coffee.

We got to Stratford and had another Act of Kindness waiting for us.  Bob Ford, from St. James parish, is a very capable bike mechanic and had his bike stand out.  (Bob is a colleagues of Tom's and had joined us in Milford for the ride in.)  One by one he hoisted all our bikes, made cable and chain adjustments and cleaned our chains and gears.  I got the prize for dirtiest chain!  2nd place to Maureen.

What a welcoming parish was St. James.  There were too many folks there to mention, but I remember Marcy and Alphonse and Fr. Tom greeting us all.  There were refreshments out for us, and they had made up toiletry bags for each of us!  Fr. Tom announced that we needed beer.  He got no arguments from us, and went out for 2 cases and some wine.  Next it was time to load into the vans for the short drive up to the YMCA for showers.  Bob Ford, a member, had arranged for this.  As we were signing in, the lady behind the desk recognized who we were - she had seen our story on WTNH, Ch. 8, she said, "Oh, you're the bikers!"  The showers were as awesome as they always are after riding all day.  No one wanted to get out, and I know this firsthand because it was perhaps the first "group shower" set-up that I'd been in since high school.  If riding, eating and sleeping together for a week didn't make me feel closer to the gentlemen in our group, then this experience certainly did!

Back at the parish house, and a wonderful dinner of chicken marsala, pasta and broccoli and the aforementioned beverages. Then it was time to set up downstairs.  Our presentation this night was what I consider to be another huge success.  There was a very good crowd, maybe 30-40, and another visit from a State Representative.  Bob kicked us off and John Ryan was particularly lively with his words this evening.  Pam put Jim Clifford on the spot during "Participate" and Jim said a few words about how and why he had joined our group.  Claire and I shared with the group some Stratford-specific poverty statistics.  Laura, the state rep, got up and gave some advice to the assembly about how to best reach and communicate with representatives.  The crowd lingered afterwards, talking, taking literature and meeting with their rep.

After clean-up we retired to the main room to start rolling out our sleeping bags.  As a study in contrast, I bedded down near Steve, with his "mountain" 3 foot high air mattress, and John Ryan, who simply uses a blanket to wrap himself in and a shoe wrapped in a tee shirt for a pillow.  Jim stayed with us too, he could've driven the few miles home for the night, but went for the full immersion program to BTC.  We assembled to share, but spent about an hour discussing logistics for the following day.  A group needed to leave at 6, which cars needed to be packed, who was going where and with whom and at what time.  We then did our sharing session, again very fulfilling and insightful with Lou taking notes.

We bedded down about 10:30pm with Alphonse saying good night and heading home, though promising that he'd be there at 5:30 the next morning to help us get up and ready to depart.  He lied, he was there at 5:15 the next morning.

Eric