

Bike trip highlights Friendship Circle

By Michael J. Solender

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Bentzion Groner paced back and forth July 12, looking at his watch under the sun's heat in the parking lot of the Lubavitch Education Center in south Charlotte.

"They're late," he said.

Groner was looking for 11 women and two support personnel that are part of a cross-country journey called Bike-4-Friendship, travelling from Miami to New York City.

"They should have been here a half-hour ago but are caught up in an afternoon rain shower," Groner said.

The women arrived around 2 p.m., exhausted but exhilarated from the day's ride.

The group rides 60-80 miles a day starting at 6 a.m. and works to finish each segment by early afternoon to beat the heat.

None has ever undertaken a cross-country ride before.

The group plans overnight and weekend stops in communities that have Friendship Circle Chapters. Before reaching Charlotte, the group made stops in Jacksonville, Fla., and Atlanta, as well as other locations along the way.

There also is a men's team simultaneously riding from San Diego and a teen group riding from Washington, D.C. The plan is for the three groups to meet July 28 in New York City.

While in Charlotte, the women spoke to the congregation at Temple Ohr Ha Torah about their experience. They also met with Charlotte City Councilman John Autry.

"For me it is more a demonstration of strength of character and determination," said rider Mushky Pearlman, 19, of Nashville, Tenn. "I am really motivated by these other women and their will. Knowing that we inspire others to support the work being done by Friendship Circle is motivating."

Groner, 30, is executive director of Charlotte-based Friendship Circle International. The nonprofit organization serves more than 80 communities worldwide connecting teenage volunteers to children with special needs.

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Charlotte was a midway point for the women participating in the trip, which is designed to raise funds and awareness of community outreach in Charlotte and across the network of communities.

“We’ll touch more than 6,000 special-needs children and their families through 11,000 teens participating worldwide this year,” Groner said.

He said the Charlotte chapter has about 40 volunteers working with more than two dozen children.

“Friendship Circle activities build social, recreational, and educational skills ... that cannot be attained through traditional therapies,” Groner said.

Friendship Circle volunteers are paired with children with special social acclimation needs, whether it is being comfortable with nonfamily members or demonstrating appropriate social skills. They meet with the child one or two times a week.

“It is always a special experience and unique bond that is formed between the children and the volunteers over the year or so they work together,” Groner said.

Zalman Pearlman, 24, was the co-organizer of the first Bike-4-Friendship ride in 2010, along with Groner’s brother Mendel, 25. Pearlman is accompanying the group, driving a large support van carrying supplies and food.

“Supporting the children and families through this work is sanctifying God’s name,” said Pearlman. “The Hebrew term for this is ‘Kiddush Hashem.’”

“The relationships formed change your perception for life.”

For more information, visit <http://friendshipcircle.com>.

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