

Mark's Trek Across America

an interview by Jane M. Martin

I heard about Mark Koltz and his plan to peddle cross-country to raise funds for the American Lung Association – and I just had to know more. Here's the Q&A as he tells his story and shares with us the inspiration behind his adventure.



You're riding to celebrate and carry on your father-in-law's legacy, Leo Lambert. Tell us a bit about Leo and the Trek Across Maine.

Since I was kid, I have always loved to be on a bicycle. Over the years, I had wonderful and extensive periods where my passion was fueled by continuous riding and great sights and trips. I also had times when life, work, and other priorities overtook me and resulted in my bikes collecting dust and my waistline growing. In 2003, after a very long drought from the bike, I found myself in a bad place. My weight had ballooned to over 250 pounds and I was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure. That was my wake up call. I returned to my bike in force ... shed 50 pounds and made a lifestyle change that has enabled me to manage my health through better nutrition and regular exercise.

My father-in-law, Leo Lambert, did not get to see my transformation. He passed away in early 2003 while teaching skiing at Sunday River with the Maine Handicapped Skiing program. Leo was a committed volunteer with the [American Lung Association](#) of Maine and New England for almost ten years before I got back on my bike. He worked at the main office in Augusta and played active roles during the annual [Trek Across Maine](#). Leo decided to do the ride himself at age 70. He completed the 3-day, 180-mile ride on an old hybrid bike. Soon after Leo's death, my wife, Karen, and our family and friends made a commitment to honor Leo's legacy and formed a team to ride the Trek Across Maine. Our team (Leo's Legacy) has ridden since 2004 and helped raise over \$75,000 to improve lung health and prevent lung disease. I have ridden five times, Karen four times, and our daughter, Leah, was a volunteer last year. The Trek celebrated its 25th year in 2009 and is a wonderfully run event that includes almost 3,000 riders and 600 volunteers. The Trek is held annually on Father's Day weekend. The ride is approximately 180 miles across Maine, from the mountains of Sunday River Ski Resort in Bethel to the coastline in Belfast, Maine. There are overnight stops at the University of Maine in Farmington and Colby College in Waterville. The event is the largest American Lung Association fundraiser in the country and raised over \$1.5 Million in 2009.

When did you first get the idea to do Mark's Trek Across America?

[Mark's Trek Across America](#) was probably first conceived soon after my Dad got me my first "10 speed" bike, a Free Spirit, from Sears. It traveled far and wide (well for an 11-year old) in my hometown of Stoughton, Massachusetts. In high school, I began following bicycle racing and long distance riding events. My fascination grew in 1978, when John Marino bicycled from California to New York in just over 13 days. John went on to found the [Race Across America](#). While my time goals will be more focused on seeing the country, I guess it was this event that truly first sparked by desire to ride across the country. As I grew older, my

interest in cycling continued. I followed racing and touring events and learned about the [Adventure Cycling Association](#). They help inspire people of all ages to travel by bicycle for fitness, fun, and self-discovery and have helped to develop over 40,000 miles of bicycle friendly routes across the country. I read about and met people who had made the journey self-supported and many that traveled with touring companies.

Last year, with my 50th birthday on the horizon, I made the decision to fulfill my life-long dream to ride across the country to celebrate the event and honor my father-in-law. It seemed only fitting to dedicate myself to working with the American Lung Association. Leo would be proud. He always put others first ... helping those in need and supporting critical causes like the American Lung Association. While it took me some time to embrace his commitment to living a healthy and active life style and to always give back to the community, I have dedicated myself to keeping his legacy alive. I am riding in Leo's honor. My ride will help carry on the important work Leo started and treasured so dearly. He was, and continues to be, an inspiration to us all.

Have you done anything like this before? What is the farthest ride you've completed?

Since 2003 I have ridden over 40,000 miles including numerous 1-3 day events and fundraisers. My only other long cycling trip was way back in college. I took a one-month self supported tour of New England and rode a little over 1,000 miles. My cross-country ride will span 50 days and cover over 3,600 miles. I will average around 80 miles per day and will have eight days of 100+ miles. My longest day will be 120 miles. That matches the longest I have ridden in a single day.

How long has it taken to make the plans?

Researching and deciding on a route and touring company took me about three months. At 50, I wanted to sleep in a bed each night! As a result, I am riding with [America by Bike](#). They are a well known cross country touring outfit that runs several cross country trips each year. They handle all the logistics, hotels, food (breakfast, rest stops, and dinner), cue sheets, mechanical support, etc. Basically, all I have to do is ride, eat, and sleep! Preparing for the ride has been an intense six-month effort of training, fundraising, and outreach. I have ridden almost 4,000 miles this year, raised almost \$15,000 for the American Lung Association, and spoken with the media, as well as numerous people impacted by lung disease. I launched a web site – www.markstrek.com – that includes lots of information about my ride, route, inspiration, and donors.

What is it about pulmonary issues that makes you so motivated to ride and raise money?

My family has had a 15-year relationship with the American Lung Association. As mentioned, my father-in-law was a long-time supporter and active volunteer. My mother-in-law still helps out with key American Lung Association events including the Trek Across Maine. During my personal seven-year history with the organization, I have come to know numerous people and families who have been impacted by lung disease. Each story and connection educated me on the wide range of conditions and battles people are waging on a daily basis. I have seen close friends lose loved ones to lung disease and cancer. Numerous friends are fighting with COPD, asthma, and Alpha-1. Others have been diagnosed with lung cancer or are awaiting lung transplants to keep them alive. My relationship grew even more personal when my father, Barry Koltz, was diagnosed with COPD. He has been on oxygen for long periods of time and also has sleep apnea and sometimes needs a CPAP (Continuous Positive Airway Pressure) machine. I ride for my father-in-law, my dad, and the families searching for cures and support.

My ride will help make a difference, improving the quality of life for families living with lung disease. Pledges raised will help search for cures, keep kids off tobacco, and fight for laws that protect the air we all breathe. The work of the American Lung Association helps to save lives every day. They are fighting to make a difference through research, advocacy, and education.

The [My Inspiration](#) page of my web site has a growing list of the people and families that inspire me to train just a little harder and reach out for more financial support. Along my journey, I plan to meet and talk

with local media, residents, and people suffering with lung disease to help raise awareness and critical funding for this important cause.

How does your family feel about the ride? The risk, distance, time away from home?

My family, friends, and sponsors have been a great support system. My family has fully embraced my efforts and has been with me every step of the way. They have all taken an active role in my preparation, fundraising, and training. It has truly been a team effort. My 11-year old daughter, Leah, coordinated a fundraiser at her school in support of my ride. Her classmates donated for the privilege of dressing down for the day. Leah also made a school-wide presentation on lung disease and the work of the American Lung Association. Not to be outdone by his younger sister, my son, Michael, led a donation effort at the University of Maryland and within his fraternity. My wife, Karen, has devoted countless hours helping me prepare for my trip and providing me the time I needed to train and fundraise. It will be tough being away from each other for two months, but cell phones, Facebook, and my web site will keep us in constant contact. The risks associated with my ride are really no greater than riding locally. My extensive training and experience on the road, together with a proven touring company and staff will further minimize any risks.

Will anybody be riding with you?

More than 50 people will be riding with me. Some ride to celebrate a birthday or retirement. Others ride in support of their personal causes and charities. Most ride for the accomplishment and fulfillment of a dream. I guess my ride is a combination of all those reasons. I have met only a few of the riders who will share the road with me. By the end of the summer, I expect to have formed life long friendships and a special bond with many people in the group.

What is your logistical support system for the ride?

As mentioned, I am riding with [America by Bike](#). They will handle all the logistics and support on my ride. ABB will have a dedicated team including a tour leader who has cycled across the country an amazing 35+ times. We will also have a mechanic and several other staff that will ensure our luggage moves from town to town, rest stops are stocked and available to keep us energized, cue sheet/maps are accurate, and meals are coordinated and bountiful. Again, all I have to do is ride, eat, and sleep! I am also working closely with the American Lung Association to arrange media interviews and some lung related visits/events along my route.

What is your greatest hope for the ride? In other words, for you, what would be the best, most amazing thing to come out of this?

My goals for the ride are two fold ... on the personal front, I hope to experience a once in a lifetime adventure, make new friendships, and see the beauty of America that only a cross country bicycle tour can offer. I hope to push myself to new limits and accomplish what few people even contemplate. I also hope to use the time to look back on 50 years of ups and downs, successes and failures, happy times and sad times ... and to look forward to what lies in store for me next. I hope my trip will be a life changing event and cause me to look at myself, my loved ones, and the world around me a little differently. Losing a few pounds can't hurt either.

On the community front ... my greatest hope is that people embrace and spread my message about the need for more research, funding, and support for families fighting with lung disease. So many people are fighting for air ... surpassing my goal of raising \$15,000 will help make a difference ... together, we can improve life, one breath at a time.

Will you be blogging throughout the Trek?

Yes ... I launched a web site – www.markstrek.com – that includes lots of information about my ride, route, inspiration, and donors. The [My BLOG](#) page of my web site will have daily updates on my ride. I have also actively used social media and have a group page on Facebook – [Mark's Trek Across America for the American Lung Association](#). I hope folks will take the time to learn more about my ride, support the cause, and follow my progress.

When will you be leaving, from where, and when do you plan to reach your destination, and where is that?

I dip my rear wheel in the Pacific Ocean on June 20th in Astoria, Oregon. From there I embark on a 50-day, 11-state, 2-country ride through some of the most beautiful and scenic areas in North America. From the natural beauty of the Cascades and Rockies to spectacular river crossings of the Columbia, Missouri and Mississippi, each day will provide a unique adventure and opportunity to raise awareness and funding for lung disease. I will conclude my journey on August 9th in Portsmouth, New Hampshire where I will dip my front wheel in the Atlantic Ocean. In honor of my father-in-law, I will make a quick trip across the bridge into Kittery, Maine to officially end my ride in the state he called home. The [My Route & Itinerary](#) page of my web site has a day-by-day itinerary and map of my route.



*Many thanks to Mark for taking the time to share his story - and for his support in improving awareness and education of chronic lung disease.
Good luck and safe travels!*