

# The Sound & Town Report

## Coasting cross-country to beat cancer

By PAIGE RENTZ

Last Sunday, brothers Justin and Jamie Merolla biked 130 miles across the Great Plains in 9.5 hours. It was a personal best for the Larchmont natives, and it brought them to Girard, Kansas, the halfway point in their journey across the country, what they're calling the PanUSA Challenge.

The Merolla brothers, along with friend Ben Hermann (who has had to pull from the challenge due to a knee injury), began their journey on June 1 from San Francisco, and will ride for two months in order to join up with the Pan-Massachusetts Challenge (PMC) in Sturbridge, Mass. on Aug. 2.

The PMC raises more money than any other athletic event in the nation, and for a cause that is close to the Merolla brothers, the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. The pair lost their mother to breast cancer when they were young.

"That's one of the main reasons we're doing this," said Justin, 24. "She was diagnosed in the early nineties and battled through '95 until she passed away."

She was from the Boston area and was an avid marathoner, and their father rode in the PMC when she was sick as a tribute to her and as a fundraiser for cancer research. He passed away in 1998 from a pulmonary embolism, and the PMC remains as a fitting tribute to both of their parents.

"This is kind of a way for us to do something in both of their memories and identify with them," said Justin. "Once you know the story and the background with us, it's pretty obvious why we're passionate about doing this."

Jamie, 18, concurred, explaining, "For both of us, this is a really important way of connecting with our parents, but it's also a way to have a great summer and have some fun and bond with each other. At the same time, we get to raise money for cancer. It's the best of both worlds."

Though Justin and Jamie have set out to have a great summer, it's not always an easy task. They are setting a grueling pace, riding an average of 85 miles per day, and on days like last Sunday, burning 8,000 calories on a ride.

"We're doing a pretty tough pace. In the Rocky Mountains and the mountains in Nevada, we were struggling quite a bit, and when we got to Kansas, we were very relieved to see that it was flat," said Justin.

In addition to the physicality of their trek, the journey is just as taxing psychologically.

"The hardest thing about it is not really the biking, but sort of the mental battle now that we've been doing it for about a month, and it's getting tougher on the mind than on the body," Justin continued. "Just getting up every day and getting back on the bike is more difficult than actually riding."

The brothers have also set an equally ambitious goal in their quest to raise money for the PMC. They aim to collect \$75,000 when all is said and done, and at present they have just over \$25,000.

"I think we have enough time to pull it off, but we'll see," said Justin, explaining that donations can continue to be applied to their goal even after the race ends in Provincetown on Aug. 2. The brothers plan to ride through Larchmont and Mamaroneck the last weekend in July as they make their way to the PMC. To follow the brothers on their journey or to make a contribution to their cause, visit [www.panusachallenge.org](http://www.panusachallenge.org).



Jamie and Justin Merolla pause their ride down a lonely highway on a cold morning in Nevada.