

Newtown Attorney Leads Cyclists On Ride To Washington For Sandy Hook Victims

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Cohen and Wolf lawyer Monte Frank was distraught after the December massacre in his hometown of Newtown. He had a hard time sleeping and wanted to do something to help. Frank wanted to combine his passion for cycling and skills as a lawyer, as well as press Congress to introduce laws to reduce gun violence. The idea of organizing a bike ride to Washington came "in the middle of the night," said Frank, who knew people who died in the school shooting.

His daughter had previously graduated from Sandy Hook Elementary School. She had one of the teachers who was killed, Vicki Soto, as a long-term substitute teacher in third grade.

Frank, a former president of the Danbury Bar Association, is a commercial litigator and handles business, real estate, municipal and construction cases. He became an avid cyclist as an undergraduate at Cornell — he also received his JD from the Ivy League school — and he's been involved in riding ever since.

"Our objective is trying to raise awareness and humanize the tragedy...so they can enact meaningful legislation," Frank said last week.

'Rolling Rally'

There were, officially, 26 riders who made the 400-mile journey, one for every educator and child who died in the shooting. In fact, the team called itself Team 26. There were 23 men and three women, ages ranging from 19 to 60.

There were five riders from Newtown. There was a former NCAA champion, U.S. and Canadian national team members, a masters national champion and state and regional champions. Frank rides for a team called Verge, which is a masters team that races all over New England and Canada.

The riders, accompanied by three vans carrying six support crew members, started out on Saturday, March 9. For the first leg, to Ridgefield, they were accompanied by Bethel First Selectman Matt Knickerbocker, Congressman Jim Himes and Chris McDonnell, whose daughter, Grace, died in the shooting.

"We had 50 to 75 additional cyclists who came with us to Ridgefield," said Frank, who has been with Cohen and Wolfe since 1993 and practices in both the Danbury and Bridgeport offices. "We had that throughout the trip, people joining us."

The riders stopped several times along the way, in various cities and towns, for rallies and meetings with town and city officials. "It was awesome. It was really great," Frank said. "Essentially, it was a 400-mile rolling rally."

All the official riders wore jackets in Sandy Hook Elementary's school colors of green and white. "That made us identifiable," Frank said. "People would honk their horns and give us a thumbs up."

The riders arrived in Washington on Tuesday, March 13, accompanied by police cruisers from D.C. and Newtown. At a news conference at the U.S. Capitol, they were greeted by the Connecticut congressional delegation. They also met with other members of Congress, including the chair of a House panel on gun violence.

Frank said he delivered two letters to Connecticut Senator Richard Blumenthal. One was from Chris McDonnell and his wife, Lynn. Another was signed by 32 family members of those killed in Sandy Hook. "The letters were calling to reduce gun violence," Frank said. "Blumenthal went to the Senate floor and read the letters into the record."

'Ride For Hope'

A Facebook page was set up so participants and their families could post both photos and emotional messages. In one post, honorary cyclist Chris McDonnell wrote that he was riding to honor his daughter.

"On December 14th, we lost the love and light of our family, our daughter Grace. Since that day I have made a promise that her life would forever be celebrated, her vision of the world as a beautiful and peaceful place forever honored, and her voice forever heard.

"I ride for HOPE that the moral conscience of our elected representatives has been awakened and will choose action over inaction when it comes to protecting the most vulnerable among us, our children.

I ride for PEACE and a society that holds itself morally responsible to leave the world a better place where gun violence is not so pervasive."

Meanwhile, Frank's daughter, Sarah, wrote about how she became close to Vicki Soto when her third-grade teacher went on maternity leave.

"We got very close and stayed close for the next year," Sarah wrote. "My dad rides to honor her and the other 25 victims....My dad rides to show that a small town in the middle of a tragedy can bring about change."