

Tu Nidito

by Susan Dawson-Cook

Since 1994, Tu Nidito Children and Family Services has supported children in the Tucson community who have lost a loved one or are dealing with a serious illness.

Liz McCusker, Tu Nidito's executive director since 1997, credits El Tour with keeping the non-profit organization operating and widening its outreach network. Serving 12 families its first year, Tu Nidito's programs and services now benefit more than 600 southern Arizona families annually.

Tu Nidito founding board member Jannie Cox, an avid cyclist employed by former El Tour title sponsor Carondelet Health Network, initiated the partnership between Perimeter Bicycling, El Tour and Tu Nidito. "We had received some monies [from El Tour] that go all the way back to our beginning in 1994," said McCusker. The 501(c)3 non-profit organization became El Tour's primary beneficiary in 1997.

Not long ago, funds raised from El Tour constituted almost half of the organization's revenues. Today, El Tour money accounts for "about 22 percent of the [nearly \$1 million] revenues we must raise from scratch every year in order to offer our programs and services to the community," said McCusker, adding that 92 percent of Tu Nidito's monies go directly to program support. "We're very proud of that statistic."

In addition to raising funds directly for the organization, El Tour has "absolutely helped us with name awareness and exposure," McCusker said. "People now recognize our name and know what we do, which has helped us to increase the number of families that we can support year to year. We attribute so

much of our success and where we are today ... to the initial and ongoing support we have gotten from Perimeter Bicycling and El Tour."

Fourteen professional paid staff, including masters level social workers and bachelor level case managers, as well as 197 well-trained volunteers, provide the network of support to struggling children.

"We focus on the unique needs of that population of children," McCusker said, adding that while Tu Nidito's mission is child-focused, "we provide care to the entire family."

Most referrals come from hospitals, social workers, and school counselors, she said. "We're one of the first places that people call for emergency grief response." Tu Nidito also does "a lot of outreach," she noted.

A Tu Nidito child may face a life-limiting illness, the loss of a parent, or learning that a parent has cancer.

The organization provides one-on-one support for seriously ill children as well as a bereavement service for others if a child in the one-on-one program dies.

"Not all of the kids that we work with die — we've seen some great miracles," McCusker said, noting that while the work involves sadness, "there is a lot of joy in it as well."

Sometimes a volunteer goes to a hospital to play a video game with a critically ill child while a parent goes to eat a meal; or Tu Nidito a social worker may help a dying child plan his or her own funeral. McCusker said it's hard to synopsise Tu Nidito's services because they can vary from family to family.

To help increase rider awareness of Tu Nidito's mission and help them

support children in the community, the agency is offering the "El Tour Ride for a Child Program." El Tour riders can check a box on the entry form, pledging to raise \$500 or more for a Tu Nidito child.

Participating riders will receive a name and a bio about the child they are riding for, along with a Team Tu Nidito cycling jersey and an El Tour T-shirt and poster. To make fundraising easier, an electronic version of the bio on the child can be obtained to paste into an email or a letter.

"We're excited about this," says McCusker. "We want to make it as meaningful as possible for the riders." Questions about the program can be directed to Ciara Meyer, Tu Nidito's Director of Programs at 322-9155.

McCusker said the support from Perimeter Bicycling and the El Tour riders has made a huge difference for an organization with a unique mission.

"No one else in our state or region does what we do," she said. "Without us, many families wouldn't have the support they need to deal with serious illness and grief — and we wouldn't be around if it weren't for Perimeter Bicycling and El Tour."



Ride For A Child

You can make your 2008 UMC El Tour de Tucson presented by Diamond Ventures ride mean more by making a difference for a child. The Ride for A Child program allows riders to put a name and face behind their fundraising and training efforts. Among the children you can ride for are Anaya and Alex.

Anaya

The oldest of three children, seven-year-old Anaya loves to draw and color and play Monopoly. Last spring at the close of her kindergarten year, Anaya was sent home with a fever. Initially believing she had a common cold, her parents were later shocked to learn she had leukemia.

Anaya and her family receive one-on-one support from a Tu Nidito social worker. As Anaya gets ready to go back to school this fall, her social worker is preparing a special presentation for the class, which will explain in kid-friendly terms what is happening with Anaya. As a team, Tu Nidito, Anaya's parents, and the school will make sure Anaya successfully transitions into first grade.

Alex

Cancer was not something Alex gave much consideration to until last May when, at age 16, he was diagnosed with Chronic Myelocytic Leukemia, a cancer most common in adults between age 40 and 60.

A courageous and outgoing teenager, Alex likes racing BMX bikes. Due to his illness and treatment, he watches more races than he participates in. However, Alex still strives to live life to its fullest and on "good days," under the watchful eye of his mother, he gets out for the occasional ride.

For a teenager like Alex, whose life has been turned upside down by cancer, being connected to other Tu Nidito kids who are experiencing similar difficulties helps him feel "not quite so different" and gives him the support he needs to make it through this difficult time.

To ride for a Tu Nidito child, look for the check box on your registration form

Water for People: Ride for a Global Purpose

In Support of a Cause Where Pouring Money Down the Drain Literally Solves Global Health Issues. by Lisa K. Harris

Water for People cares about everyone's health and wellness. The charitable organization works hard to establish access to safe drinking water and sanitation in developing countries.

"We take clean water and working toilets for granted in the U.S.," said Asia Philbin, a hydrologist with City of Tucson Water. "But throughout the world more than 1.1 billion people lack safe drinking water and 2.6 billion either use a field for a bathroom, or if they do have a toilet, the waste goes right back into their surrounding environment without being adequately processed."

Cholera, dysentery, and typhoid, are just a few of the deadly diseases spread by contaminated water. Each day 6,000 people, predominately children, die from water-related illnesses.

This will be Water for People's second year as a beneficiary of El Tour de Tucson. "We are thrilled to be included," Philbin said.

Water for People, which was started in 1991 by professionals in the water industry, currently works in five countries: Bolivia, Honduras, Guatemala, Malawi, and India. "Last year we served more than 100,000 people in 180 communities," Philbin said.

"Water for People works with local villages and in-country agencies to develop appropriate technologies," said Dennis Rule, Strategic Planning Administrator for City of Tucson Water. "In an Indian or Guatemalan village where

locals must walk three to four miles a day for drinking water, Water for People volunteers "will dig a well and develop a hand pump. We will build latrines that don't mix with drinking water from a nearby stream."

Projects may be as simple as educating villagers about separating the source of drinking water and latrines. "Often they don't realize that contaminated water leads to disease." Water for People focuses on solutions that can be operated and maintained by the village long after the volunteers have left.

Responding to the tremendous need for their services, the organization will soon add five additional countries to its roster: Ecuador, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Rwanda, and Uganda. "Our country list is based on need as well as how feasible it is to work there," Philbin said. "Countries must have stable governments, be safe, and accessible."

El Tour support is vital for Water for People. "It's become one of our key fundraisers," Philbin said. Last year 30 riders participated on the Water for People cycling team; most were employees of City of Tucson Water and others "interested in the global water crisis."

In addition to the registration fee, Water for People requests that participants raise \$100 each. Last year the Water for People team raised \$14,000. This year, Philbin said, "we're hoping to raise

\$20,000 and have 50 riders."

Rule regularly commutes to work on his bike. He participated in El Tour's 2006 century ride. "It was a party on wheels," Rule said. "I had a wonderful time and enjoyed all the people I met." Rule tried to recruit supporters of Water for People within City of Tucson Water to participate in last year's ride. "They looked at me and said I was nuts to think riding 109 miles was fun." But once Water for People became an El Tour beneficiary, "they had to do it. I shamed them into it."

"Most water professionals sit behind desks all day, looking at computer screens or attending meetings," Rule said. "I wanted my coworkers to get up and get out, to enjoy the health benefits cycling offers."

To Rule, training and participating in El Tour was the perfect solution. "We could support Water for People and be healthier at the same time," he said. "The two organizations work well together."

The Water for People cycling team followed the Greater Arizona Bike Association's (GABA) training program. "A group of us trained together. Afterwards, we'd stop and have coffee and muffins." Rule's wife, Debbie,

joined the cycling team and the Rules finished El Tour's century together. "I've never been in better shape," Rule said of his readiness for last year's El Tour.

The Water for People cycling team is a great way to meet people, Rule noted. One of the best parts of the century ride was "talking with other cyclists as I toured along."

The night before El Tour the organization sponsored a carbohydrate loading dinner. "It was a wonderful opportunity for people to socialize and rally the Water for People cycling team," Philbin said.

On the event day the organization sponsored a tent at the finish line. "We gave away bottled water supplied by the City of Tucson and offered free massages," Philbin said. "We had a lot of fun at our tent." The massages "helped alleviate sore muscles in the weary riders. Every massage table was full."

The Water for People cycling team blends global and personal wellness. They welcome anyone interested in pedaling for the purpose of improving both the quality of water and sanitation in developing countries. To join Water for People's 2008 El Tour team see pedalwithpurpose.org.

Lisa K. Harris is a Tucson-based freelance writer.

