

ALUMNI

180-Mile Cycle to the Sea Fundraiser Postponed Because of COVID-19 Concerns

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▲ Jacob Conley and Dr. Shea Stuart train recently at Cowpens (S.C.) National Battlefield.

Jacob Conley, '08, Raises Money for Adaptive Sports Program with Support From Alma Mater

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—Jacob Conley, a 2008 graduate of Gardner-Webb University, will have to wait to participate in his 12th Cycle to the Sea. Originally scheduled for Oct. 21-23, the fundraiser has been postponed because of COVID-19 concerns. Organizers will look to reschedule either in April or October 2022. Conley said all donations will be forwarded to the new date.

Not one to pass up a challenge, Conley eagerly accepted an invitation from his physical therapist to join the fundraising bike ride for the first time in 2010. But this was no ordinary cycling trip, and Conley is not a typical cyclist. Born with cerebral palsy, which restricts movement in his legs, he uses a wheelchair to get around. Conley handcycled 180 miles in three days to complete his first Cycle To the Sea fundraiser. Since then, the 38-year-old has participated in the event 11 times.

This year, he has the support of his alma mater and teammates—cycling enthusiast, Steve Gilbert, and Dr. Shea Stuart, GWU professor of English. Gardner-Webb has signed on as a corporate sponsor of the event. “I am really appreciative of the support,” Conley said. “I put a link to the event on Twitter, and Dr. (William) Downs contacted me and was interested. The Gardner-Webb logo will be on the back of the jersey, so when anybody sees us going down the road, they are going to see the GWU logo.”

Conley loves sports, and he’s spent over 20 years writing about local sports in Rutherford, Cleveland and Gaston counties. He was sports editor for Gardner-Webb’s student newspaper.



- ▲ Jacob Conley and his teammates, Dr. Shea Stuart and Steve Gilbert, pose for a picture at Cowpens (S.C.) National Battlefield.
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Cycle to the Sea is the largest annual fundraiser for the [Adaptive Sports & Adventures Program](https://atriumhealth.org/medical-services/specialty-care/rehabilitation/adaptive-sports-and-adventures-program) (<https://atriumhealth.org/medical-services/specialty-care/rehabilitation/adaptive-sports-and-adventures-program>) (ASAP), a community-based program located within Carolinas Rehabilitation in Charlotte, N.C. “We are 100 percent philanthropically based, so the fundraisers that we do mean everything,” said ASAP Coordinator Jennifer Moore. For over two decades, the organization has helped adults and children participate in adaptive sports. They serve hundreds of people across the Southeast, offering competitive avenues and community involvement for adaptive participants in handcycling and other activities, such as archery, air rifle, curling, deer hunting, kayaking, rugby, snow skiing, snowboarding, swimming, tennis, youth triathlons, and water skiing.

“Our program provides activity, healthy outlets, recreation and leisure skills and an opportunity to compete again in some of our sports,” explained Moore, a Licensed Recreational Therapist and Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist. “It gives life again. A lot of people think it’s just the physical aspect or having fun, but there is a definite psychosocial component to being involved with ASAP. It provides hope and an outlet to relieve signs of stress, even signs of depression.”

To prepare, Conley trains three days a week, handcycling around 30 miles a day. He either rides at Cowpens (S.C.) National Battlefield or on the stationary trainer at his home. Gilbert, who has been cycling for 40 years, met Conley a couple of years ago at a fundraiser for a mutual friend. He decided to come and ride with Conley at Cowpens, and the two became friends. When Conley’s mom, Margie, was hurt in a bicycle wreck, Gilbert rode with him so he could continue training. Mrs. Conley explained that her son needs a rider with him to provide assistance with traffic or the cycle if needed.

Stuart, who has been cycling since 2016, rides loops around campus to prepare for the event or jogs when she doesn’t have time for a bike ride. She’s also been to Cowpens to ride with Conley and Gilbert. Stuart met Conley before he graduated from GWU and stayed in touch with him on Twitter. He’s invited her to come on the ride before, and this year her schedule worked out so that she could participate.



- ▲ Bicycle riders help push handcyclists up the hills on the Cycle to the Sea course. The cyclists travel 60 miles a day to make the three-day trip from Monroe, N.C., to Myrtle Beach, S.C.

Cycle to the Sea begins in Monroe, N.C., and goes to Myrtle Beach, S.C. Participants ride 60 miles a day. “We leave in the morning from the starting location or hotels,” Conley described. “We ride 15 miles, take a break, 15 miles, eat lunch, 15 miles, take a break, 15 miles, eat supper. When you break it up like that, it’s not terrible.”

Conley’s team has raised about \$4,300 and is hoping to raise \$6,000. He said the hardest days of the trip are the first day and the last day. “The first day coming out of Charlotte, there are hills,” he informed. “I don’t mind the hills so much. I don’t really like going down the hill at 25-30 miles an hour, that’s probably the hardest part. The third day when you get close to the beach, the wind kicks up and it’s like pushing uphill the whole time.”

He said the riders are encouraged by each other and everyone on the trip. “You’re one big family riding together and supporting each other,” he said. “We go on the back roads, and the small towns provide a police escort when we are coming in or leaving town. There’s a group of motorcycle riders who ride beside us and block traffic at intersections and keep the cars off of us. The number of participants varies from year to year, but this year we have a big group, about 35.”

Conley asserted that while traveling together, the cyclists develop friendships and are welcomed by the people they pass on the trip. “You see all the people sitting out on the front porch, and you wave at them,” he shared. “You are not allowed to have head phones or anything, because you want to hear

oncoming traffic. You just start singing to help the miles pass by. We have a lot of military veterans, so we sing the military cadence songs and rhythms—the marching stuff.”

Learn more about Cycle to the Sea.

Visit Team Conley’s page.

Located in the North Carolina foothills, Gardner-Webb University is a private, Christian, liberal arts university. Gardner-Webb emphasizes a strong student-centered experience and rigorous academics to prepare students to become effective leaders within the global community. Ignite your future at Gardner-Webb.edu.

