



'On one outback road the goannas were on tiptoe, that was how hot the road was

Rotarians ride the country for a cause

By Christine McNeil

They're young and not so young, retired and in the workforce, couples and singles, but they have two things in common – a passion for cycling and a passion for raising money for a good cause.

Last week a team of Rotarians rode in to Mullumbimby to fuel up on sandwiches and cake by Federation Bridge before pushing off on the next leg of an 18,000 km trip right around Australia, a trip that will see them visiting every Rotary district in the land along the way.

The Great Australian Bike Ride is raising money to promote awareness of mental health, an issue that Rotary Australia has named as their major project in recent years, and it began on March 21 in Melbourne, the same city it will wind up in on October 10, World Mental Health Day.

"One in five people suffer a mental illness in their lifetime," explained Sydney to Brisbane ride manager Denis Green, "and this Rotary project is to attempt to remove the stigma of mental illness and to raise funds for research.

"Rotarians can make a difference in raising awareness, and Australian Rotary Health currently provides \$4 million per year in research and scholarships.

"Initially this was going to be a three-year project, but now into its ninth year, there's no way it's going to stop – it's our major area of research because it is so under-funded.

"Nearly all riders are passionate about riding, and some have personal reasons for undertaking the trip."

One of the latter, and one of only four riders who plan to complete the entire circumnavigation of the continent, is "Noosa Mermaid", aka Roberta Gordon,

a retired primary school teacher in her early 60s.

"I'm a lifesaver in Noosa," said Roberta, "retired for the last six years, and when I heard about the bike ride I went wow!"

For Roberta a short day is a trifling 77km in the saddle, an average 100, and a long day would be 168 on the Nullarbor with a strong westerly blowing helpfully behind.

She's a long way from the chronically depressed woman of some years back, uncertain where to turn, until friends one day dragged her to the gym.

"I never looked back, threw the pills away," she said, "and began to get serious after I found I'd won a mini triathlon."

Roberta does a lot of public speaking when not in the saddle, particularly talking about the troubling area of children's health.

"When I started teaching in 1968," she said, "it was carrot and celery sticks for snack time, often straight out of the back yard vegie garden – now it's all chips and poppers, stuff full of additives.

"I had a class of 50 kids then, one had asthma, one was 'slow', but move on 35 years and out of 25 kids there were four asthmatics, two ADHD, one anaphylactic, and a third of the grade were from single-parent families – I saw the downfall in children's health."

Like all her fellow riders, Roberta welcomes with open arms the challenges and the pleasures of the ride ("on one outback road the goannas were on tiptoe, that was how hot the road was") and the chance to make a difference to the health of the nation. "So far I've raised \$38,600, and my goal is \$40,000," she said.

Besides the tiptoeing goannas, as well as the sound of the eagles overhead, trip highlights are definitely staying with host families.

The Great Australian Bike Ride can be followed at www.greataustralianbikeride.org.au



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President of The Rotary Club of Mullumbimby David D'Vash with three of the four riders planning to circumnavigate Australia: (left to right) Roberta Gordon, John Farrugia and Gonny Rundell.