

It's been close to 150 days since his last drag—the longest he's ever gone without smoking a cigarette in 30 years. And Brian Fopma couldn't be happier.

The Clifton motorcycle cop, a 23-year veteran of the force, finally ditched the unhealthy habit earlier this summer after being challenged by fellow officers and friends, Randy Colondres and John Kavakich.

This isn't the first time he's quit smoking—in fact, it's probably Fopma's sixth attempt. But this time, he's got extra incentive: riding in the Police Unity Tour.

It's an annual 300-mile bike ride held in May. Some 600 officers from throughout the nation pedal to Washington D.C. to honor fallen comrades and raise funds for the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial (policeunitytour.com).

For the past two years, Fopma, 47, has been part of the tour, riding his police-issued Harley Davidson on the route as he and other officers secured side streets and highways so the bicyclists could ride safely.

But come May 9, 2010, Fopma is ditching the leather spats and motor for Lycra riding shorts and a self-propelled bike. He'll be pedaling alongside Colondres, Kavakich and his fellow officers.

"It was motivation and it kind of gave me a goal," Fopma said of his decision to quit smoking and take up cycling. "If I do this, I'll actually be able to ride to Washington."

The first step was to totally quit cigarettes, which can be incredibly difficult after being hooked.

"I mostly picked it up from when I was working at a gas station growing up," the 1981 CHS grad said of his habit. "I was a mechanic, and we were smoking while working."

Wheeling from Smoking

Story by Joe Hawrylko



Over the years, the habit progressed. From a few at work to a pack-and-a-half a day. He'd light up with coffee. When he parked his Harley while on the job, he'd naturally reach into his pocket for a pack of smokes and his lighter.

Fopma had always been in shape, but smoking prevented him from fully reaching his potential. His lungs were hampered by thick black tar and dense plaque choked off blood supply to needy muscles.

Fopma's physician gave him an order for Chantrex, which was able to keep him off of cigarettes.

"You still get urges, but not as much as it used to be," he said. "Maybe after a good dinner or something, I could go for one."

Finally smoke free, Fopma went to the Allwood Bike Store and got a new set of wheels for training.

"I went on the bicycle and I was like, 'Oh, this is killing me and I'm not able to breathe,'" Fopma

laughed. He had not been on an un-motorized set of wheels in four decades. "I don't think I went a mile on the first day."

Eventually, his body began to adapt to the absence of nicotine and training became easier. Fopma rides two to three times a week, usually logging between 10 and 20 miles per session.

"I definitely feel better. I don't have that cough where you're hacking up your lungs that I used to get," said Fopma. "I can see the difference when I'm riding the bike, I have more lung capacity."

Since the Unity Tour will test the limit of his stamina, it is imperative that Fopma's health is in top shape.

Due to the health benefits of quitting and intense training, Fopma completed a 62-mile ride through the Ramapo Mountains in the dead heat of August. He also rode on a 50-mile tour from the George Washington Bridge to upstate New York and back last month.

The Great American Smokeout is on Nov. 19

The purpose of the Great American Smokeout is to help smokers quit. Give up the habit for at least one day, many will tell you, with the hope that you'll break the cycle and be motivated to quit completely. But anyone who has beat tobacco will also tell say that quitting smoking is difficult. Nicotine is an addictive drug, but there are resources to help.

Smokefree.gov recommends using the START method. Set a quit date. Tell family and friends of your plan. Anticipate the challenges of quitting. Remove tobacco products from your home, car and work. And Talk to your doctor about getting help. The craving can be triggered by being around other smokers. Feeling stressed or depressed? That could get you reaching for your pack. Alcohol can bring about the urge to smoke as well.

For many, a cigarette is a ritual, such as having one in the car on the way to work, starting the day with a few puffs or having a few drags on work break. Breaking the cycle can improve your chances of kicking the habit for good. So if you think you are ready, try it on Nov. 19. For help, call the Passaic County Council on Alcoholism & Drug Abuse Prevention at 973-473-3366 x101 or the American Cancer Society at 1-800-ACS-2345.

That's quite the improvement for someone who was going through a pack-and-a-half a day just four months ago, especially since Fopma hasn't ridden a bike since his childhood.

"A lot of guys didn't think I'd be able to quit. Even my wife ... she didn't think I was going to quit at first," said Fopma. "I made up my mind and quit smoking and it really did change my life."

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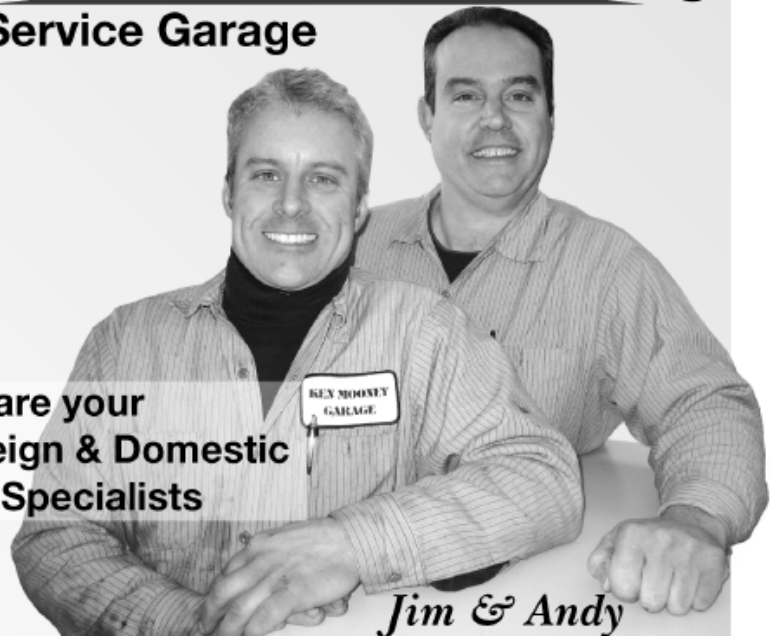
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