

“When you’ve got your new heart, we’re going to do Elephant Rock.” A year and two days before, only a piece of technology was keeping a weak, out-of-breath Sean Crawley alive. Then, with a new heart in his chest and a UCH transplant coordinator who happens to be an avid cyclist at his side, he rode 34 miles to Elephant Rock.



Cycling heart transplant coordinator pushed the pace

A Year Later, 34 Miles with a New Heart

By Todd Neff

Sean Crawley’s heart was failing. He had been hospitalized for weeks. A left ventricular assist device – or LVAD, an external pump that can work like a wearable artificial heart – was keeping him alive until his number came up in the heart-transplant lottery.

Crawley, 30, was, to put it mildly, an unlikely candidate for a 34-mile bike ride with an elevation gain of 2,147 feet. But his University of Colorado Hospital heart transplant coordinator was a lady named Nancy Ireland. Ireland, an avid recreational cyclist, had in 2008 ridden 2,000 miles in a month to raise awareness for blood, tissue and organ donation (*Insider*, September 9, 2008). She made what seemed at the time to Crawley an outlandish prediction.

“When you’ve got your new heart, we’re going to do Elephant Rock,” she told him.

Crawley felt incredibly weak. He was having surgical staples removed at that moment. He looked down at “this device hanging out of me and a pump keeping me alive,” as he put it, and thought she was crazy. But he said he would do it.

“It was something he could work toward,” Ireland recalled. “I love cycling and I like to help promote healthy and active living with the transplant population, so it was a good fit for me.”

Quick decline. Crawley’s transplant story began on Feb. 24, 2010. He had been dragging on the basketball court, and couldn’t catch his breath the next day. The diagnosis: cardiomyopathy, or a heart that had become enlarged because of failing muscle.



Nancy Ireland and Sean Crawley prepare for the 34-mile Elephant Rock ride. The event was a year – nearly to the day – after Crawley’s return home after a heart transplant at UCH.

He soon found himself transferred to UCH. He hadn’t been there an hour when he was told he needed a heart transplant.

In March, he received the LVAD as a bridge to transplant. A few weeks later, while Crawley was on a putting green, the call came. The night of May 18, 2010, T. Brett Reece, MD, implanted a donor heart.

It was a tough surgery. Complications with the donor’s and his own aorta kept Crawley on the table for 36 hours. He was at UCH until June 4. The following day, June 5, 2010, he went down town to watch the American Heart Association’s Heart Walk in downtown Denver. He was too weak to participate.

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Months passed. He continued cardiac rehabilitation. His strength and stamina improved. He was still a long way from being able to ride 34 miles, but Ireland wasn't about to let him off the hook.

Tour de Wash Park. In March, she went with him to a bike shop, where he bought himself a ride. In April, they went on their first training ride – six miles or so around the Washington Park loop.

Trips of 10 miles, then 15, then, at the Cherry Creek Reservoir, 20 miles, followed. Ireland rode with him during her weekend free time. With both working, it was the only time they could do it.

On June 5, 2011 – a year and a day after he left UCH with a transplanted heart – they met at the Douglas County Fairgrounds as part of the American Transplant Foundation's 2011 Team Transplant, which rode in the Subaru Elephant Rock ride. The courses ranged from seven miles to 100 miles long. The 34 miles Ireland had suggested for Crawley was nearly twice as far as he had ever ridden, much less with a transplanted heart. He was the only heart transplant patient in the event.

They set off at 7:30 a.m. Crawley had to watch his heart rate – for the first year post-surgery, he had been told to keep it under 120 beats per minute (a restriction since lifted). He found his legs to be a bigger problem. At mile 21, he felt exhausted, and the heat was coming on. But he realized he was merely tired, not *tired* tired like before the transplant.

His second wind came, and shortly after noon, he and Ireland arrived back at the fairgrounds. He had done it.

Ireland said Crawley's recovery has been exceptional, and that he's become an example of what a heart transplant can bring. She and Crawley are continuing to ride, although she envisions him becoming the leader of other heart transplant patients who join him on **Team Transplant** in the coming years.

"I rode with him last weekend," Ireland said. "He's still getting stronger."

Crawley says he will continue to promote organ donation as a living example of what it can do for people. And for those who have gone through a transplant, he says, "Go out and set some goals for yourself. Go out and do something. Unless they tell you that you have limitations, you don't have limitations."