

Quincyan Mark Wiewel kicks off annual WCU Bike for Food fundraiser

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Mark Wiewel is at it again.

For the seventh straight year, the president and CEO of the Western Catholic Union is getting ready to take a seat on his 27-speed recumbent bicycle and start pedaling several hundred miles to raise money for local food pantries.

It's all part of the "WCU Bike for Food" fundraiser he initiated in 2006.

Wiewel -- joined by his two sons, Matthew and Mark -- will be riding in the 300-mile Illinois Trail and Parks bike ride, which begins today (Sunday) in Dixon and continues for six days. The ride will loop through Savanna, Rock Island and Fulton before returning to Dixon on Friday.

As part of their riding adventure, Wiewel and his two sons will be soliciting donations to benefit 10 food pantries in the Quincy area -- seven on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River and three in Northeast Missouri.

Their goal is to raise \$20,000, but they don't plan to generate all of that in one week. Wiewel said the bike ride is simply the kickoff of the "WCU Bike for Food" campaign, which will continue through mid-December.

According to Wiewel, the WCU will match up to \$500 in donations to each of the 10 food pantries between now and December. That's a potential \$5,000 from the WCU, provided the community comes through with enough matching donations.

Checks should be sent directly to the food pantries. "The only thing we ask is for them to write the word 'Bike' somewhere on the check," Wiewel said.

If people want to donate cash, they are asked to include a note specifying the money is for the Bike for Food effort.

For the first time, Wiewel said, canned goods and other non-perishable food items also may be donated directly to the pantries and be counted toward for the WCU match. Donors should simply ask the pantry to include the food donations with other WCU Bike for Food contributions.

Wiewel is hoping the public comes through, because the need for food is apparently bigger than usual this year.

"There are people who are desperately in need of food," Wiewel said. "The need goes on, so we want people to donate through the rest of the year."

Since Wiewel started the Bike for Food campaign in 2006, he and his supporters have raised \$69,000 for food pantries in Quincy, Hannibal, Palmyra and Canton.

"This thing has been pretty cool," he said.

Wiewel said he was inspired to start the campaign by a Scripture verse from the Book of James that says: "What good is it having faith if you don't have the good deeds to go with it?"

"That kind of resonated with me," he said. "So I asked myself, 'What can I do?'"

Since he loved to ride a bike long distances, he decided to combine biking with raising money. Along the way he discovered the joy of using a recumbent bike, which lets the rider sit back while pedaling, which is easier on the body in some respects but more difficult in others.

"It's all leg power," he said. "Ninety percent of your body weight is on that back wheel. These bikes are really fast going downhill and really slow going uphill."

That's where the bike's 27 gears come in handy -- to make pedaling easier going up and down steep inclines.

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