

Cyclists gather for Alyn's 14th 'Wheels of Love' trek

• By JUDY SIEGEL

As a child in Cuba, Damian Lopez Alfonzo specialized in finding lost kites. Yet his hobby resulted in the tragic redirection of his life. As he went to retrieve a lost kite from an electrical pole with a metal rod, Alfonzo was critically injured by the electric explosion, suffering burns to his face, body and resulting in the amputation of both his hands. In the course of his therapy, Alfonzo turned to cycling to rehabilitate both his body and spirit.

Today, the Cuban native is one of 700 bicycle riders from around the world who will take part in the 14th annual Wheels of Love, an event put on by the Alyn Orthopedic Hospital and Rehabilitation Center in Jerusalem, set to take place next week.

The five-day ride is aimed at raising some \$2 million. There will be five different routes: off-road, off-road enduro, on-road, challenge-on-road and a touring route. On October 31, the pediatric patients of Alyn will greet the riders when they reach the hospital in the south of the capital.

Alfonzo quickly excelled at cycling when it was introduced as one of his therapies. Yet when he tried to participate in competitions, the judges kept refusing to allow him to register, insisting that even though he was very strong, as an amputee they were not allowed to let him compete.

But when Alfonzo met Tracy Lee, a professional bike rider from the US, everything changed. It took eight years of effort for Lee to be able to bring Alfonzo to the US for surgery.



DAMIAN LOPEZ ALFONZO, who suffered severe injuries after being electrocuted as a child, poses with his bike in Jerusalem ahead of the 14th annual Wheels of Love fundraiser.

(Courtesy Alyn Orthopedic Hospital and Rehabilitation Center)

Dr. Rafi Friedman, who followed Alfonzo's rehabilitation, made the connection with Wheels of Love. Steve Zrobnick, one of the founders of the bike ride, is a personal friend of Friedman. Despite partial amputations of both hands, Alfonzo rides without prostheses and expertly controls his bicycle. In next week's Wheels of Love ride, Alfonzo will ride the challenge-on-road route – one of the most difficult routes offered.

Joining Alfonzo – in addition to individuals from abroad and Israel – are groups from Clal Health Insurance, Israel Chemicals, Makhteshim Agan, Agnetek and other companies.

Alyn director-general Dr.

Maurit Beer says the story of Alfonzo's rehabilitation is inspiring and repeatedly proves the amazing abilities of mankind.

"At Alyn, we encourage including sports activities in the rehabilitation process. The fact that besides his own rehabilitation Damian is doing something for children in rehabilitation is moving."

Alfonzo says that receiving his visa to go to Israel was the highlight of his week: "When I'm riding, I feel like a regular person.

"The accident helped make me stronger. I try to do things that regular people tell themselves: 'No... it's hard... I can't...' and I do them."