

Valerie DeLaune, LAc

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Letter to the Editor: (*Homer News*)

I never thought I'd go to a "biker party" in my lifetime. But with all the rumors about the Hoka Hey and whether or not it was a scam, I was curious. I'd had a chance to check out some of these bikers – they went to the Laundromat just like me and they bought groceries just like me. They didn't look so scary, just tired.

The event organizers were at the celebration. They seemed very sincere to me, as I watched them address the bikers who had made it. They grieved those who had fallen along the way and Jim Durham's grandfather, Chief Red Cloud who had hosted the riders somewhere along the way, said a prayer in Lakota over a Skype call. It was very somber and emotional, and there was clearly a lot of pain. From what I was able to gather from the address, the event was a fundraiser and the money netted from the event is going to several projects and organizations, such as bringing water to those who don't have it on the reservation and mothers of soldiers who did not come home. I can't remember the names of the other beneficiaries. But there was ample acknowledgement that the event had concluded with a very high price. They said they had no intention of putting on the event again; that from the beginning it was a one-time thing.

I made a point of talking to the bikers, to see who they were and how they felt about the ride. It turns out they have day jobs just like me, but instead of putting on skis and goggles in their recreational time like me, they put on leathers and jump on a motorcycle. As for the Hoka Hey event, many riders were riding in memory of their fallen war comrades and for them it was never about getting to Homer first. As to the questions about the route, one rider told me that when he would get to a checkpoint and look at the next checkpoint on the route map, the route would meander and not be the most direct route, which puzzled him at first. He then figured out they had built in opportunities to cheat, if one so chose. He said that if a rider followed the maps and checkpoints, it was very clear. He also said, "It was all about integrity." He stated that the staff did check ending mileage (and that they knew exactly how many miles should have been ridden), riders did take lie-detector tests at the end and that hair samples were taken to make sure riders had not taken amphetamines or other drugs to stay awake. DMV checks were still in-process to make sure riders hadn't gotten ticketed along the way. All entrants were well-warned that they needed passports to get into Canada and that Canada was very strict about denying access to anyone with any kind of legal violations. About 56 riders were turned back at the border. For this man, it was a very spiritual journey. He said he had a lot of realizations because of the time it forced him to spend with his own thoughts. I'm sorry I don't recall his name, but I had not thought at the time that I would be writing a letter.

As I watched the riders interact with each other, I could see the bonds that had been formed over the course of the ride. There was a lot of hugging going on in general. (I myself, a complete stranger up until that moment, was hugged several times!). Later in the evening, when I was walking my dog, I passed a small group of riders camping next to the road. Two of them had just gotten married on the spot. After I talked to them, a

couple of riders who had just made it into town rolled by. Though this group was exhausted, they struggled to their feet and made sure their new comrades were welcomed.

One of the things the riders kept expressing was how wonderful people had been along the way and how well they have been treated by the people of Homer. They were just amazed at how welcomed they felt. As for my fears about going to a “wild biker party,” I and a few other people closed the party down at about 1:45 a.m. Almost all the bikers had either gone to bed or were sitting quietly around scattered campfires near their tents. There were a few bikers standing quietly in the back behind the dancers, but most of the remaining crowd were die-hard Homer fans of Three Legged Mule, who played much later than expected.

My overall impression from listening to the organizers and the finishing riders was that the organizers had tried to do a good thing, and it was a huge event to attempt to organize. It sounds to me like they did their best to anticipate what they could, and gave fair warning to riders. Safe riding was emphasized and troopers were asked to pull over riders that looked fatigued. It says a lot to me that the organizers did complete the ride to Homer and stood before the crowd and acknowledged that some things did not go as well as hoped. The celebratory finish line party was exactly as promoted. The riders that made it to Homer were glad they did it, and it was a positive experience for them. If it had been a scam, the promoters would not have come to Homer and the party would have been non-existent. They would have had nothing to gain by doing anything past the point of promoting the event and collecting the entrant fees. I do think having the prize money for the first legitimate finisher isn't such a good idea, because riders will focus on that and drive past the point of safety no matter the rules, which then endangers other people on the highways. And motorcycles are inherently more dangerous to drive than a car; statistically they have more accidents, partially because they are less visible to other motor vehicles. But it appears that to me that the organizers did not deserve to have their integrity attacked. I felt I needed to speak out as an impartial observer. I'm glad I went and found out for myself.

~ Valerie DeLaune, LAc
Homer Resident