



Nahil Sharkasi

Tibra Spotlight, August 2002
by Mabrookah Heneidi*

"I guess I was having a bad day. Wondering if I could do it, if I had it in me."

She did have it in her.

Nahil Sharkasi, a 20 year-old Libyan student at the University of Maryland, had never been involved in athletics before she made up her mind to join AIDS Ride. A non-profit bicycling event, AIDS Ride keeps the AIDS epidemic in the public eye and generates badly needed funds for treatment and prevention programs. Riders in the New England area trek 350 miles (563 km) on bicycles in four days, across all of New York and Massachusetts.

Name: Nahil Sharkasi

Date of Birth : 13 March, 1982

Place of Birth: State College, Pennsylvania

Mother: Magda Fahema, Tripoli

Father: Tawfik Sharkasi, Benghazi

Occupation: Junior at University of Maryland, Photographer

Residence: Beltsville, Maryland



The race would push Nahil to her physical and mental limits. In describing AIDS Ride, she said, "The challenge focused my energy and attention in a way that was totally new to me; it made me appreciate my body, and be really thankful for all that I have." For preparation, she biked 20 miles (32 km) every other day, but as she admitted, "Every day, especially as it got closer to the time, I was doubting myself." But, from June 20-23, she made the two-wheeled journey across two states, accompanied by her college friend Kristen Spoales, and hundreds of other riders. Although she successfully completed the ride, she concedes that her preparation was not adequate, for

nothing could have prepared her for the terrain she rode through. "It was up and down all the time. Basically, it was mountains," she said.

In order to participate in the ride, Nahil also had to raise \$2100 in sponsorship money that would go to service organizations working within the community that the Ride passes through, providing medical care, food, shelter, and other service for those with HIV and AIDS. Finding donors was easier than she imagined. "Everyone was very supportive because I was doing something different," she said.

One concern that Nahil had was that community members might take an issue with the beneficiaries of the sponsorship money. With other raging world concerns, she understood that some people might have protested that her energies were misdirected. No one did raise their voice though, which Nahil was very grateful for. "I can't put one person's suffering above another's," she explained, and with this in mind, her participation assumed a role greater than just helping AIDS victims, but helping humanity.



Nahil and Kristen

The AIDS epidemic has touched all of the world, and Libya is no exception. Although religious and cultural practices have prevented the virus from infiltrating most of society, 393 children were reported to have been tragically infected with the HIV virus in Benghazi after having been given contaminated blood in 1998. Libyan Red Crescent reports that infected children, though not responsible for their infection, still live with much stigma because of the cultural taboo surrounding the disease.

AIDSRide may have been Nahil's most physically trying endeavor, but helping combat AIDS is not alone in the causes for which she feels passionately. In April, she demonstrated in the massive Washington D.C. Palestine rally, and as a student journalist, she actively pushes her school paper to deal fairly with issues concerning Muslims and the Middle East. "I do what I can to help wherever I can," she said.

This creed is carried out in other facets of her life. This summer, Nahil interned with the International Children's Art Foundation as a photographer and videographer. She is currently working on a project with the Cyprus Peace through Art group, which is attempting to reconcile Cyprus, Greek and Turkish halves through the sharing of children's artwork.



Nahil and her mother, Magda

Having traveled throughout the world, and having lived throughout the United States and in Egypt, have provided her with an international world perspective that she believes has helped her decide to pursue journalism. As a Libyan-American, she also recognizes how much culture has affected her life. "Our lives are not like other Libyans who live there [Libya]," she said, going on to explain that "You don't realize how American you have become until you remove yourself from that culture."

With a firm grasp of her multinational identity, and an attuned ear for the concerns within both these nations, Nahil has great aspirations for helping humanity. Her enthusiasm displays true dedication, a quality that is necessary in the rising generation if it is going to face the challenges and make a difference locally and globally.

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