

The Berkshire Eagle

Engines roar and emotions soar at Jimmy's Ride

By Amanda Korman, Berkshire Eagle Staff

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PITTSFIELD -- The roar of 130 motorcycles is a sound of solace to Gloria Baczek.

The aunt of Jimmy Bernardo, a Pittsfield boy who was abducted and murdered at age 12 in 1990, Baczek put her hand to her heart on Sunday morning as hogs growled past her on North Street to kick off the 16th annual ride in her nephew's name.

"It's healing, to see this many people come every year," Baczek said. "It's very emotional."

Jimmy's Ride, an annual fundraiser for the Berkshire County Kids Place & Violence Prevention Center, wound from North Street into New York state and back to Onoto Lake, where hundreds gathered to swim and listen to bands like Whiskey City and Rock Hounds.

A celebratory atmosphere pervaded the family-filled lakeshore on the pristinely clear day; some called the blue sky and mild heat "Jimmy weather."

"I think every year he shines down on us and makes sure the weather is good," said Rob Bernardo, Jimmy's younger brother who organized and rode in the event.

"He's always smiling down on us," said Mary Bernardo, Jimmy's mother, who rode as a passenger on her husband Ron's bike.

About 20 volunteers from the Berkshire Hills chapter of the Harley Davidson club led the pack, blocking traffic at lights and intersections so that "the whole pack rides as one bike," said Rob Bernardo.

"They're all good riders, and they follow our lead,"

said Rick Grandbois, the ride's head row captain.

Jimmy's

Ride is personal for the many new and old friends, like Grandbois, who have come out to support the Bernardos in the 21 years since serial killer Lewis Lent took Jimmy Bernardo's life.

Andy Street, 29, was friends with the Bernardo boys growing up. This year was his first time riding in the benefit, with his wife, Jennifer, as his passenger.

After previously attending as viewers, "We finally bought a bike," said Jennifer Street. "It was our wedding present to each other."

Dick Mendel, who works at Berkshire Life with Mary Bernardo, has ridden his motorcycle in the event for more than 10 years and now volunteers as a leader with others from the Harley Davidson club.

"The ride was great. It is every year. You can't ask for a better production," Mendel said, noting how groups of children along the route waved "thank you" signs. "Everybody here has a connection somehow."

Through registration fees, a vacation raffle and refreshment sales, organizers were expecting to raise about \$20,000 to support Kids Place operations, according to director Christa Collier.

As the Bernardos and Collier pointed out, child abuse is a widespread problem in the Berkshires.



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"It really affects everybody -- everybody knows somebody who's been abused," Collier said. "I think it's a unique way to bring people together to support a cause."

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