

Riding in tandem

Tandem Eyes cycling club takes vision-impaired cyclists on the road



Peterborough This Week

By [Sarah Frank](#)

PETERBOROUGH -- It still feels a little odd for Mark Smith to strap on a bike helmet again.

He hasn't attempted to ride a bike in 10 years but he says he's starting to get the hang of it again and he loves it. After complication with a brain tumour and stroke left the Peterborough man with vision and co-ordination problems, he'd lumped cycling in with a group of other activities he might not ever enjoy again. That is, until he found Tandem Eyes.

An offshoot of the Peterborough Cycling Club, the group uses a tandem bikes and a combination of teamwork and trust to give those who are vision-impaired an opportunity to cycle around the city.

Preparing for a ride on Monday evening (May 26), Mr. Smith is still a little nervous but noticeably excited to get going. As a 'stoker,' he sits on the back of

one of the bikes. A captain sits on the front -- directing the steering, speed and watching for obstacles.

Essentially, the captain is the eyes of the team.

"It's really just gaining that trust," Mr. Smith says, adding it was a little difficult at first but he's getting comfortable and has no plans to quit riding.

One of the founders of the group, Anne Wood, says key to success on the ride is communication. While the captain directs the ride, both riders need to act in unison, so it's a team effort.

"Our feet are connected by a timing chain," she says. "The captain needs to be constantly talking to the stoker when breaking, turning right or left, or when there's an obstacle coming up."

Ms Wood is also vision impaired and is one of the club's regular stokers. Her husband, Kevin Wood, is her captain. Twenty-six years ago, Ms Wood suffered a rare cancer that spread to her lungs and brain. To control bleeding during an operation, surgeons removed her right orbital lobe. She didn't know she was going to lose some of her sight until she woke up.

She still has some vision in the lower right quadrant of her sightline.

Ms Wood says she loves the chance to get out for some exercise, and to get back to one of her favourite hobbies. This is Tandem Eye's second cycling season.

"I absolutely love it," she says. "All I do on the second seat is contribute greatly to the power of the bike...I'm able to relax from that position."

Spending some quality time with her husband is a bonus. As opposed to riding on separate bikes, she says it's easy to hear one another.

With four tandem bikes now available for members to use, she's happy to see so much interest from the community.

"People with vision loss -- they can sometimes experience a bit of isolation," she says. "You can come out to get exercise but equally important is the opportunity to socialize."

Ms Wood heard there was a similar cycling group in Toronto and got in touch with members there. With some help from four other members and the Peterborough Cycling Club, Tandem Eyes was born.

The club currently has four bikes, some of which were donated by community members and one is on loan from Wild Rock Outfitters. The group put a call out

for captains last winter and was overwhelmed by the response. She says if the club had more tandem bikes, they'd have enough captains to take in new members.

In addition to those who are partially vision impaired, those who are legally blind or are blind and deaf are also welcome.

Every member goes through an orientation to give riders strategies for success on a tandem bike before they go for their first ride. Members are also insured since, since the club operating under the Peterborough Cycling Club.

President Craig Murray says supporting Tandem Eyes is a natural fit for the organization.

"We think it's great," he says.

Tandem Eyes rides every Monday and Wednesday from May to early September, starting at 6 p.m. The rides last about two hours, with routes varying.

For more information, contact Ms Wood at 705-741-3406.