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The wheel deal || Cuban cyclist gets disabled Israeli youth back on track

Damian Lopez Alfonso arrives in Israel with a mission, as he joins a charity ride with a Jerusalem hospital: Get up when you are down and don't let disability define you.

By Danna Harman | Oct. 27, 2013 | 1:00 AM

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Damian Lopez Alfonso in Tel Aviv last week. No self-pity. Photo by Tomer Appelbaum

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As a child, Damian Lopez Alfonso was into street biking. A neighborhood champion in his native Cuba, he beat everyone in the local races, even the older boys. Then, at age 13, a freak accident changed his life forever. It was a sunny day and Alfonso was out near his Havana home with friends, when the kite they were flying got stuck in a power line. He shimmied up the post, and, with a metal rod, tried to dislodge it. Thirteen thousand volts of electricity coursed through his body. He survived, but barely.

When he left the hospital four months later, his face was disfigured beyond recognition, and both his arms had been amputated just below the elbows. Alfonso had trouble eating, speaking or even closing his eyes. But he did not wallow in self-pity. "I was not sad," he said this week, speaking to Haaretz on the rooftop terrace of his Tel Aviv hotel, a day after flying

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THIS STORY IS BY

Danna Harman

into the country. "I just knew I had to begin all over again."

He decided, for starters, to get back on his bike.

At first, he kept crashing - his stumps, balanced on upturned handlebars, would slide off, making him lose balance. His nervous mother could barely watch and begged him to get off the bicycle and come inside. Strangers, seeing the burnt boy with no forearms or hands careening along the streets, pointed and stared.

"I supposed they were shocked," says Alfonso, speaking in Spanish and often repeating his words slowly, so as to be understood (his words can be slurred due to the shape of his reconstructed mouth). "But I would just say: 'Hey listen, anyone can have an accident in life.'"

In the years since, Alfonso has put the accident behind him, and put his cycling - and his life - back on track. Today, at 37, he is a professional racer and a member of Cuba's national cycling team. Last year, he competed in the Paralympics Games in London, coming fifth in his race, and proudly carrying the Cuban flag as the country's sole cycling representative

Getting back up when you are down and not letting disability define you - that is the message Alfonso has come to Israel with as he joins the [Wheels of Love](#) ride, a five-day charity ride to raise money for Jerusalem's Alyn Hospital - Israel's only pediatric and adolescent rehabilitation facility.

Alyn treats children - Arabs and Israelis alike - born with congenital diseases, or injured - like Alfonso - in accidents, terror attacks or any other way. There are tots at the hospital with severe burns. There are youngsters with muscle, nerve or bone diseases. There are first-graders with spinal cord or brain injuries. And there are teenagers requiring rehabilitation after orthopedic, neurosurgical or any other procedures.

In its 14 years of existence, Wheels of Love has raised \$20 million for the hospital. It is the largest multi-route international charity sports event in the country, with hundreds of riders from around the world participating in the five different routes: on-road, on-road challenge, off-road, off-road challenge and touring.

It begins Sunday in Emek Hefer in the north and ends Thursday at the Alyn hospital, where the riders will be greeted by the young patients. What will Alfonso tell those kids at the end of his ride? "That they should always look forward and never give up," he says. "If they try and fail, that is OK too. But they should not be afraid. We should all have faith."

Strong connection

It's Alfonso's first trip to the country, organized and orchestrated by a young fourth-year medical student at the Sackler Faculty of Medicine in Tel Aviv. Rafi Fredman, 26, from St Louis, Missouri, has met Alfonso only once, for a few hours last July. Fredman was doing a surgery rotation at the Montefiore Medical Center in New York with plastic surgeon Oren Tepper, who has been doing much of Alfonso's reconstructive facial work.

"There was something so compelling about his story, I just wanted to help," says Fredman, who has no fund-raising experience, speaks no Spanish, does not ride a bike, and has never done anything like this before. "I was talking to my dad after meeting Damian and we started talking about the Alyn bike ride, which I have known about for a long time,



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because my late Safta [grandmother] was a supporter. We thought, 'Wow, how great would it be if we could help Damian participate in the ride? He would be so inspiring to the children of Alyn,'" recalls Fredman.

And so, in between hospital rounds and classes, Fredman found the time to send out letters and emails to friends and family asking for support, set up a fund-raising web page, and badger Israel's Interior Ministry to get Alfonso a tourist visa - no small feat for a Cuban non-Jew. In total, Fredman raised \$5,241, which will not only cover Alfonso's trip to Israel, but also allow for a donation to Alyn.

"For some reason I don't really understand, I feel a strong connection to people who have suffered serious injuries and are deformed," says Fredman, speaking from Los Angeles, where he is now doing another rotation. As a student, adds Fredman, who plans to become a surgeon, "one does not get lot of opportunities to make any huge differences. But here I saw that opportunity. That's what it's all about. That's what I want to do with my life."

The kindness of strangers has followed Alfonso throughout the years, beginning with Tracy Lea, a former elite racer from Maryland, who met Alfonso at the Pan-Am Masters Cycling Championships in Cuba in 2002. Moved by the plucky cyclist's story, Lea returned to the United States determined to help him. She soon secured a travel permit for Alfonso to the States, and with the help of a group of New York area supporters, brought Alfonso over for free facial surgery at the Institute of Reconstructive Plastic Surgery at NYU Langone Medical Center.

Soon, with her prodding, others began pitching in to do their bit for Alfonso, who still lives in a modest home in Havana with his mother, and earns extra money repairing bikes in the backyard.

Hanger, Inc. supplied cup-shaped prosthetics that his arm stumps slip into when he's riding; Fuji Bikes and Shimano donated equipment; Oakley provided sunglasses; and the Challenged Athletes Foundation came up with thousands of dollars worth of grants to help him enlist in international races. Countless others donated time and love - opening their homes for him, driving him to doctors appointments, and keeping him company along the way.

"I am here thanks to the grace of others," says Alfonso in conclusion. "I have met a lot of angels along my way." It may have taken faith and courage to get back up on his bike - as well as, he smiles, a good sense of balance - but he could not have done it without friends, either. "No one should be ashamed to ask for help if they need it," he says. "There are a lot of good people in this world."



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