



SMILOW CANCER HOSPITAL  
AT YALE-NEW HAVEN

Douglas Johnson  
Rider, 2013 Closer to Free Ride

To truly understand what brought Douglas Johnson to the Closer to Free Ride, you need to understand just how close he was to his father. And just how shocked he was to learn not only that his dad had cancer, but that Douglas would end up fighting his own battle alongside his father.

Douglas spent his entire life trying to be just like his dad and to model his life after his father's. His dad's legacy at work, his spiritual leadership at church and most importantly his guidance to Douglas and his three older brothers were priceless to the Johnson family. His Dad was always bigger than life and Douglas watched his every move as he grew up in his shadow. "Mimicking his mild mannered approach to life and his fellow man came easy to me under his teachings," Douglas remembers.

"Little did I know that in December of 2011 we would come face to face with cancer at the same time," Douglas explains. Douglas's dad had been battling cancer for a few years when Douglas was diagnosed with prostate cancer at the age of 45. He remembers thinking to himself: "For the first time in my life, I don't want to be like dad right now. Why is this happening to us?" Looking back now, Douglas realizes that his battle was minor compared to father's. Yet his father never complained. He never asked 'why me' or said 'I don't feel well today.' He always said "I feel great," even on the days he endured dialysis and chemo treatments. He even managed one last lesson for his family on his very last day, June 16, 2013. Douglas knew in his heart that his father would never leave them on Father's Day. And indeed, his father fought hard and passed away peacefully shortly after midnight. His strength and courage continued to his last day just so his boys would not lose their dad on Father's Day.

Douglas remembers walking away from his father's funeral thinking to himself that it was impossible to mourn such a wonderful and courageous person. "It was the same courage that I saw on a television commercial for Closer to Free and Smilow Cancer Hospital on my first day back from his funeral," Douglas remembers. "I was so moved by that commercial that I had to sign up for the Ride and start raising funds for the fight against cancer. What better way to honor him and his caregivers."

The 2013 Ride was Douglas's first organized ride and he was very nervous getting ready and training for the 62-mile route. "Several people offered many words of encouragement as the day got closer and closer," he recalls. "I remember Mathew Feiner from the Devil's Gear Bike Shop telling me it would be one of the best days I would ever spend on a bike. I was hoping he'd be right."

Douglas remembers being at peace as the sun came up on Ride Day. He wore his survivor jersey with pride even though he thought it was too tight and made him look fat. As it turned out, the Ride was everything that Matt from Devil's Gear told him it would be. "The Closer to Free Ride will be something I'll remember for the rest of my life," Douglas says. "All of the faces in the windows and the patients and staff along the sidewalk. It was very moving. The support from other riders was the best. Especially on some of the hills." At times, riders would see his survivor jersey and ask to ride a few miles in his honor. Each time, he replied the same way: "Please ride for my dad's honor. He's the real reason I'm here today." And his dad will be the reason once again as Douglas prepares to ride in the 2014 Closer to Free Ride on Saturday, September 6.

