

*Gaffney Ledger*

***Hundreds of cyclists descend on city***

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Nearly 600 cyclists from across the United States converged on Gaffney on Saturday for the 7th annual Tour DaVita — a 3-day bicycle ride that moves around the country each year.

Held to raise both awareness of kidney-related diseases and money for prevention, organizers said this year's ride has raised \$890,000 as of Saturday and that the annual event has raised nearly \$5 million since its inception.

The 2013 Tour DaVita began at the Cherokee County Youth Sports Complex. Riders departed at 8 a.m. Sunday for a 60-mile ride to Chester State Park. Monday's ride, from Chester to Fountain Inn, will afford riders the choice of 80-mile or 100-mile routes, while Tuesday's finishing leg will see riders go from Fountain Inn to Seneca.

All told, the three legs of the ride total 220 miles. The event isn't a race, however, and it's open and accommodating to riders of any skill level. Participants simply had to raise at least \$750 for the ride's charitable efforts and pay for their own transportation to the Upstate.

Josh Poysnick, of Denver, Colo., was participating in his first-ever Tour DaVita while his wife, Tara, was participating in her second.

"It's literally the most fun thing I've ever done," Tara said. "Camping for five days ... pedaling forever."

While Denver is a bike-friendly city and the Poysnicks often commute by bicycle, Tara said you don't have to be a hardcore bicyclist to participate in the Tour DaVita. There's breaks and rest stops along each route, she said. "And don't forget about the massage tent at the end of the day," she said with a laugh.

Most participants were flying into Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport and organizers had shuttle buses running like

clockwork between Gaffney and the airport on Saturday. Every time a bus pulled into the Cherokee County Youth Sports Complex with another load of participants, organizers and volunteers greeted them like they were rock stars. Some participants are doctors, nurses and technicians who work in kidney dialysis clinics, offered Tour DaVita spokeswoman Bianca Violante, and some are current patients. One participant was the recipient of a recent kidney transplant.

“Everybody rides for a different reason,” offered Matt Weissert, a division vice president for DaVita, the dialysis division of DaVita Health Care Partners for which the race is named. “Some ride for a patient who couldn’t be here. Some ride for a loved one suffering from kidney disease.”

Weissert, who has responsibilities over DaVita’s operations in South Carolina and Coastal Georgia, said he began lobbying for bringing the Tour DaVita to South Carolina after he personally participated in the Tour DaVita held in Connecticut two years ago.

He said South Carolina is a perfect place for the bike tour for many reasons, among them great people, great weather and a robust cycling community in the Upstate.

The Tour DaVita is a big operation. Organizers, along with volunteers and Back Country, a tour operator, arrived in Gaffney well in advance of the ride to set up hundreds of tents for ride participants to sleep in, as well as huge tents for food service.

Participants could bring their own bikes if they wanted, but Back Country had hundreds of bikes on hand for participants to use. Each bike is personally set up for each rider.

The tent city had everything you could want, including shower facilities. And because six participants in the ride are undergoing dialysis, organizers also had a recreational vehicle with dialysis equipment on board.

A huge undertaking in many respects, all of the tents and equipment had to be taken down and immediately moved to the next stop of the tour as volunteers tried to keep ahead of the riders.

Proceeds from the event this year will help The Kidney Trust, which provides kidney function testing to poor and underserved

communities. Participants in the race, as well as all of the organizers and volunteers, also had an opportunity Saturday to have their kidneys tested for free. All it took was a small vial of their blood and 10 minutes for the results.

“You can’t stop kidney disease,” said Gloria Upchurch, program manager for The Kidney Trust. “But you can slow it down.”

Treatments include medications, changes in diet and lifestyle and increased exercise, she said. “It’s easier to change your lifestyle,” she assured, “than to be hooked up to a dialysis machine.”