

Hannah's blind faith 'THE RIDE THAT'S CHANGED MY LIFE'

The cycling partners have been an inspiration during their big adventure

With 120km Cape Reinga winds howling around her, Hannah Pascoe nervously climbed aboard her brand-new tandem bike and set off on her biggest challenge yet – to become the first woman who is blind to cycle the length of New Zealand.

Despite her trepidation, the Invercargill mum felt cautiously optimistic knowing her whole family was behind her – and in front of her in the case of cousin Kara Roderick-Wandless, her pilot on the tandem bike.

And it was all for a good cause, with the team raising \$27,500 towards a “chasing dreams fund” for Blind Sport New Zealand.

“I want to make a difference and do everything I can to help other blind athletes,” says Hannah, 39. “This is my small way of giving back, as well as getting to do something cool.”

It took the second cousins 19 days to cover the length of the country in November, riding around 100km daily without any days off.

“As sore as my bum was when we got to Bluff, I thought it would be so good to ride back again,” laughs theatre nurse and mum-of-three Kara, 44.

“By then, we had found



Hannah with son Max and guide dog Dara. Right: All smiles on a daily lunch stop with the crew – Hannah, Janet, Kara and dad Nobby.



A proud moment for Nobby and his girl.



our rhythm and got our routine right. The feeling you get riding your bike is so awesome.”

Without her guide dog, Hannah had to map out every new space with her cane and says this was one of the biggest challenges.

“I found cycling physically easier than I thought, but mentally it was tough. I lost some of my independence. At home, I do everything myself. I look after my little boy, go to work, get around town and do everything that everyone else does.

But as soon as I got on the

bike, I felt like me again.

“I did have to trust in my pilot and not freak out going downhill when the bike wobbles. The biggest thing was getting comfortable with not having control.”

About a month before the ride, Kara experienced this for herself. She explains, “I wanted to feel what Hannah feels, so I jumped on the back of a tandem with a blindfold and realised the trust Hannah puts in me. I have huge respect for Hannah. She’s amazing.”

In sharing their story with the *Weekly*, the pair hope

more cyclists will consider becoming bike pilots so other people who are blind or partially sighted can experience the pleasure and freedom she gets from riding.

“If it wasn’t for losing my full sight, I probably wouldn’t have achieved the things I have,” shares Hannah, who is endlessly grateful for all the opportunities she’s had.

At her peak, she placed fifth in the world in para-cycling and has run 16 marathons, competed in two half Ironman events, as well as three 250km charity rides from

PHOTOS: PAULA BROWN.



Queenstown to Invercargill.

However, Hannah is modest about her accomplishments, crediting her family and a can-do upbringing.

“I haven’t always been totally blind,” says the mum of Max, four, who works as an administrator for Blind Low Vision NZ. “I was born with congenital glaucoma and lost my vision at 25.

“My mum treated me no differently from my brothers and she never saw my vision impairment as an issue. When I was losing my sight, I worried about how I was going to manage, but my upbringing came back to me and I just got on with it. I learned to do things a different way, and I got better and better at it.”

The athletes had family support throughout the ride. Kara’s dad Nobby Roderick drove the van, while aunties Marcia Te Au-Thompson and Ora Barron were the “camp mums”.

Endurance athlete Janet Willis also joined the group as a support rider and back-up pilot. And it wasn’t just those who love them by their sides. In many towns, supporters turned up eager to cheer them on and help.

‘I jumped on with a blindfold and realised the trust Hannah puts in me’

“We were nervous about the traffic in Auckland, but a cycling group there banded together and got us through the city,” explains Hannah. “In Dunedin, the blind community got on tandems and rode with us. Our own

Invercargill supporters were behind us the whole way and so many people fundraised for us.”

Kara recalls another event where they missed visiting a school outside of Culverden. “Two teachers chased us

down with cars full of girls who wanted to see us. They couldn’t believe we work, we ride, we’ve got kids,” she laughs. “Hannah and I want to show girls and women that they can do it all.”

Ruth Jillings

The cousins are closer than ever. “Hannah is amazing,” says Kara.

