

Macomb Daily News

Retired teacher bikes in memory of former student



Retired Cherokee Elementary School teacher Ernie Coil rode his bike from Cherokee to the Mackinac Bridge Aug. 9 to Aug. 14 in memory of former student Cassie Kenny, who passed away from cancer in 2012. Submitted photo

By Nicole Tuttle, For The Macomb Daily

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A photo from Cassie Kenny's days as a Cherokee Elementary School student and office assistant. Pictured are Cassie Kenny, Lauren Addy, Liz Tucci, Justin Viola, Sydney Ronald, and Devin Prisbe. Retired Cherokee Elementary School teacher Ernie Coil recently rode his bike from the Clinton Township school to the Mackinac Bridge in memory of Kenny, who died of cancer as a high school student. Submitted photo

Ernie Coil was on the verge of retirement from his teaching position at Cherokee Elementary School in May 2012 when he received an e-mail that former student Cassie Kenny had lost her battle with cancer.

The loss of the Chippewa Valley High School sophomore, who had been Coil's pupil as a fifth grader, stuck in his mind for years, coming as it did just as he was about to retire. To keep her name and memory alive, Coil decided to make a bike trip from Cherokee Elementary School in Clinton Township to the Mackinac Bridge Aug. 9 to Aug. 14.

"It is one of those things that stick in your brain and you just, I always thought about it, what a great kid she was. It was one of those things that creep into your brain and won't leave you. I wanted to do something to remember her by," Coil said.

Coil said he is an avid bike rider and last took a trip to the Mackinac Bridge with his son in 2001, facing challenging hills and headwinds.

“I have never done an overnighiter since 2001, so it is challenging,” Coil said.

Coil said he chose to begin the journey at Cherokee Elementary School because that is where he taught Kenny, and he began at 8 a.m. on Aug. 9. His decision to make his final destination the Mackinac Bridge was based on the personal memory of the fact that he and his son had shared the memorable bonding experience of traveling there on a bike trip in 2001. Coil said he mapped out his trip using Google Maps, and must spend the majority of the trip on the road with vehicles.

“... You hope people are paying attention and not texting and driving. When you ride a bike that is a concern you have ...” Coil said.

[At facebook.com/pages/Mr-Coil-Treks-Mac-to-Mack-To-Defeat-Childhood-Cancer/152061411640818?notif_t=fbpage_fan_invite](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Mr-Coil-Treks-Mac-to-Mack-To-Defeat-Childhood-Cancer/152061411640818?notif_t=fbpage_fan_invite), Coil included information on how to make a donation.

“I have spoken to Matt Holland who works for the Children’s Hospital of Michigan Foundation. They are involved in several programs from research to an annual program they put on every year at Barrymore’s for cancer survivors,” Coil wrote on Facebook. “Please contact him (1-313-993-8815) and discuss with him how you would like your donation to be used. Inform him that you are making it in Cassie’s memory ...”

Coil said that he has no particular fundraising goal in mind, but that he remembers Kenny as the type of student who always tried to help others.

“If people want to donate, I appreciate their kindness, but more importantly, while I am making this trip up there next week, I want you to take a moment and just maybe smile at someone with a grimace on their face or send a nice note to someone, or look in the mirror and tell the person reflected back how beautiful they are. That is the type of girl she was,” Coil said on Aug. 7.

Coil said he would use the time during his ride to reflect on Kenny’s life.

“When you teach for 37 years, and I taught elementary kids, they are an important part of your life and memories forever,” Coil said.

Nicole Tuttle is a freelance reporter for The Macomb Daily