

## UNBILLABLE HOURS: FREEWHEELING IN ISRAEL FOR A CAUSE

October 16, 2009, By Danny Jacobs

Mike Hamburg purchased a special suitcase for his trip to Israel next week, but it won't carry any clothes. Instead, it will contain his bike, which he will assemble and ride for five days across northern Israel in support of a children's hospital in Jerusalem. "It's going to be pretty neat to have my bike halfway around across the world," he said. "People's road bikes are like their own cars. It's a very personal thing."

The trip combines three things close to Hamburg's heart — Israel, riding and helping others. "The idea of going to northern Israel, riding my bike, raising money for children — it's just a wonderful opportunity," said Hamburg, of Baumohl|Hamburg LLC in Pikesville.

Hamburg is one of nearly 400 riders from across the world participating in WHEELS OF LOVE, which starts Nov. 1. But he is one of only 50 who will ride the "Challenge" route, easily both the longest (325 miles) and steepest (climbing a total of 40,000 feet, including up Mount Hermon, Israel's highest point) of the four routes. Hamburg, 40, trained in the hills of northern Baltimore County during his 100 miles of riding per week in the summer but admits it does not compare to what he will climb in Israel. "The idea of riding my bike 30 or 40 or 50 miles a day is not a problem," he said. "But when you're talking about going through the mountains, that's a real goal."

Then, too, the route goes through the Golan Heights — a territory that has been a frequent target of rocket attacks in years past from neighboring Syria as part of the two countries' ongoing boundary dispute. Police escorts accompany riders throughout the trip, and Hamburg knows the region's turbulent history. "I'm going to be riding through a lot of these towns that were shelled a few summers ago," he said. "I'm not concerned about it, but I'm aware of it."

Hamburg has been riding since 2005, after taking a spinning class at the Jewish Community Center in Owings Mills. He soon bought a road bike and "kept going," as he put it. He joined a local group that rode every Sunday morning, and it was on one of those trips last year that someone mentioned WHEELS OF LOVE. "As soon as I heard about 'Israel' and 'bike riding' I was there," Hamburg said.

Hamburg will spend three days before and after the ride traveling around the country, so he was disappointed to learn he would not be in Baltimore when his firm receives the Baltimore County Bar Association's Annual Pro Bono Firm Award on Oct. 29. But then, his absence is for a good cause. Proceeds from WHEELS OF LOVE, now in its 10th year, benefit ALYN Hospital, Israel's only pediatric and adolescent rehabilitation center. Riders are asked to raise a minimum of \$2,000 before the event; Hamburg has already exceeded his goal of \$5,000.

The ride concludes at the hospital, where the children greet the riders. "It should be a very emotional finale from what I understand, seeing all of those kids cheering you on," Hamburg said.

Hamburg's love of Israel goes back to his own childhood. He visited the country with his parents as a boy, and last year he took his wife and two daughters. They met an Israeli student who stayed with them for a summer as part of an exchange program, and Hamburg plans to see him again this time as well.

While Hamburg is focused on completing this year's ride, he can already see it becoming an annual event. "I think it's very important that we have a strong Israel culturally," he said. "Whatever I can do to help out the country and the people of the country I'm very glad to do it."

For more information on ALYN Hospital and the WHEELS OF LOVE ride, please visit [www.alynhospital.org](http://www.alynhospital.org).



*Nearly 400 riders will participate in the Wheels of Love ride across Israel, but Mike Hamburg is one of only 50 to take the long, steep 'Challenge' route that climbs up Mount Hermon and winds through the Golan Heights. He's raised more than \$5,000 in pledges.*