

Cancer Survivor completes 750km Charity Cycle from Paris 2 Nice **(<https://www.activelink.ie/node/110932>)**



Cancer Survivor completes 750km Charity Cycle from Paris 2 Nice as dialysis friend awaits a second transplant

A community mental health nurse who overcame breast cancer returned from France at the weekend after completing a self-funded, 750 km charity cycle over six days from Paris to Nice. Ber Downey, a Mullingar native, who has made Clonakilty in West Cork her home, undertook this remarkable journey to raise awareness around organ donation, particularly the living kidney donor programme, with all funds raised going to the Irish Kidney Association.

Ber's motivation in undertaking the cycle was to support her close friend, Fiona O'Donnell, a performance nutritionist, who has returned to dialysis since January this year after her first kidney transplant, received seven years ago from another close friend, Grainne O'Keeffe, eventually, failed. Just seven months after the living donor kidney transplant in 2017 between Fiona and Grainne, they completed a Triathlon in Schull with Ber. The inspiring trio, all living in Clonakilty, and who each have three children, formed a close bond through their shared passion for sport and wellness, having met at their local West Cork Triathlon Club over ten years ago. Since then, they have remained steadfast in their commitment to each other.

Having raised over €11,500 for the Irish Kidney Association, through her fundraising link www.idonate.ie/fundraiser/BerDowney (<http://www.idonate.ie/fundraiser/BerDowney>) Ber along with 52 other cyclists in this year's Paris2Nice challenge collectively raised over €500,000 for charities.

Fiona's dialysis requires her to make two-hour round trips from Clonakilty to Cork University Hospital for four hours' treatment sessions, three times a week. While Ber could not be a living kidney donor to Fiona, she was determined to spread awareness about organ donation, living kidney donation, and support the Irish Kidney Association, the charity that has been a lifeline for her friend Fiona and other kidney patients in Ireland.

Despite months of preparation and feeling confident she could complete the challenge, when the event came around it was fraught with personal challenges for Ber.

Her journey began with a series of travel setbacks including her outwards flight from Cork to Paris being grounded due to technical issues, and an unscheduled trip to Dublin to catch an early morning flight the next morning from there.

But the real stress test came during the cycle itself. Ber completed Day One soaked and cold after a day of heavy rain and wind. On the third day, Ber awoke feeling unwell with a sore throat. Her autoimmune arthritis had flared up, just as she faced a gruelling 127 km ride with a 1,500-meter climb. Despite these challenges, Ber described how the support from her fellow cyclists was 'overwhelming'. She dropped back to an easier-paced group, where her teammates rallied around her, helping her push through the pain and complete the day's ride.

"Cycling that day was so tough physically, but the kindness and encouragement of the other cyclists kept me going," she said. "It was a beautiful route, and while I was struggling, I felt supported every step of the way."

After a quiet evening to recover, Ber's immune system remained weakened, but she was determined to complete the event. On the following day, she joined another easier-paced group of cyclists to conserve her energy so she could finish the 127 km distance. The beautiful scenery along the route provided some comfort as she powered through the remaining distance.

The final day of the challenge was both physically demanding and emotionally charged. The sun shone brightly as the cyclists navigated busy roads through Cannes and Antibes, where hypervigilance was required to ensure their safety. Despite the obstacles, Ber pushed on, motivated by her friends, family, and the cause she was cycling for.

As she reached the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, the cyclists were greeted by a rousing reception from a large group of supporters who had gathered to cheer them on. Ber said, "It was an incredibly emotional moment. Some of us, including myself, were filled with joy while remembering loved ones who had passed away - wishing they could have witnessed our accomplishment. At the same time, we were reflecting on the long journey we had prepared for, hoping we had done justice to the charities we represented and honoured the support of those who stood by us."

"When I crossed that finish line, it was a huge sense of relief and pride. It had been such a physical and personal challenge but knowing I did it for my friend Fiona and others facing kidney disease and organ failure made it all worthwhile," she said. She added, "The Paris2Nice organisers were amazing - the whole event was planned to perfection, and every need was taken care of, from nutrition to support on the road."

Reflecting on the journey after her flight home from Nice back to Dublin Airport, she added, "I feel so privileged to have such a wonderful husband, family, and friends who supported me all the way. It wasn't a solo journey; my family and friends were behind me every step. I'm incredibly proud of the awareness we've raised about kidney disease, organ donation and the great work of the Irish Kidney Association."

Fiona O'Donnell spoke about her gratitude to Ber and her kidney donor Grainne in advance of the Paris2Nice challenge: *"Having two such dedicated close friends who will go so far for me is incredibly humbling. Grainne made an extraordinary sacrifice to me seven years ago by donating a kidney to me, especially as she had a young family. Her generosity allowed me to be present for my husband and children and lead a fulfilling and healthy life until recently. There are no words to describe the depth of my gratitude. These two amazing women adopted me as one of their own. It's not just about the profound gift of life Grainne has given to me and the physical 750 km challenge Ber will undertake at her own expense; it's the emotional and moral support they've provided me every step of the way. Their commitment to raising awareness for kidney disease and living donation means the world to me and gives me hope for the future."*

Referring to the act of donating a kidney to her friend Fiona in 2017 **Grainne**, *"I feel very blessed that I was able to give the gift of a kidney transplant to my close friend. Being a donor has never impacted my health adversely. I would love to see more living donors."*

For more information about Ber's fundraising efforts or to contribute, please visit www.idonate.ie/fundraiser/BerDowney (<http://www.idonate.ie/fundraiser/BerDowney>)

Becoming an organ donor is a simple process: carry a donor card, note your consent on your driving license, or set up the organ donor app on your phone but most importantly Share Your Wishes with your loved ones. For more information on organ donation and the Irish Kidney Association visit www.ika.ie (<http://www.ika.ie>)

Region

Nationwide

[Donate!](https://www.idonate.ie/fundraiser/BerDowney) (<https://www.idonate.ie/fundraiser/BerDowney>)

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