

JoRiding to Independence: An Interview with Steven Cohen

Joey Cohen will never live a fully independent life. Due to severe autism, he has trouble performing basic tasks such as getting dressed, using the bathroom, and feeding himself without help. For a long time, it seemed that riding a bicycle was just one more thing Joey couldn't do.

"Joey loves things that move," explained Steven Cohen, Joey's father. "Anything you can put him on, a Big Wheel, a Green Machine, even though he's too big for it now, he still likes to roll it." But all attempts to teach Joey to ride a bike ended in frustration because he lacks the necessary coordination and balance to pedal.

After some time spent watching his son struggle, Cohen hit on an idea. He tinkered with the bike, ending up with a completely bare frame – no pedals, no chain, only a seat on top of two wheels.

With his new bike, Joey could use his feet to push himself along without the pedals



Steven Cohen on a JoRide bicycle.

getting in the way. After seeing how much Joey enjoyed this, Cohen stripped down a second bike for himself, and JoRiding was born.

Cohen's next step was to go to centers for special education and propose bike-riding programs. "A lot of times, when you go to these programs, all they have to offer the kids are programs in a classroom setting," Cohen said. "I didn't want Joey to sit in a class, he sits in class all day."

The Cohens live in Northbrook, and Joey is mainstreamed at a local school, where he joins his peers for classes in art and physical education, and spends the rest of his day in an Individual Education Program (IEP). At the beginning of each year, Cohen decides on goals for his son's development through the IEP. Programs at special education centers are supplemental to IEPs in schools, and also cater to adults.

These centers were open to the idea of a physical education-based program, but Cohen quickly ran into an issue. "They said, 'How many bikes do you have?'" Cohen recalled, "And I said, 'One.'"

Cohen bought six bikes and converted them, and the pilot program was a success. Since then, JoRide has expanded into a company that sells bicycles across the country. Cohen also helps to integrate the bikes into programs within schools such as the North Suburban Special Education District, as well as after-school activity programs at Keshet in Northbrook, the Center for Enriched Living in Riverwoods, and Have Dreams in Evanston and Park Ridge.

The bikes are manufactured by Bike USA, based out of Bethlehem, Penn., and are sold through Toys "R" Us, Amazon, and other major distributors, as well as the Autism Speaks website; for every bike sold through that site, Cohen will donate 20 percent of profits to the foundation. Locally, the bikes are available at Trek Bicycle Store in Highland Park and Kiddles Sporting Goods

in Lake Forest. There are two models: Independence, a child-sized blue bike, and Freedom, a larger silver bike for adults (visit joride.com for more information).

The models are aptly named. Cohen sees bike riding as a kind of freedom that individuals with special needs rarely experience. "Every kid likes a bicycle," Cohen said. "When you're a kid, you're on your own, your parents take the time to spend with you and then they let you go. And then you have a boy like my son, you're never letting go. A lot of parents have a hard time."

Much of the challenge for Cohen in leading these programs is in convincing parents and family members that the JoRide bicycle is safe. The special needs individuals themselves can face some anxiety as well, especially if they have tried and failed to ride a standard bike in the past.

Joey himself has been a huge help in demonstrating how safe and fun JoRiding can be. "He doesn't talk," Cohen said, "But he's able to communicate by showing others what he's doing. He'll stop and wait for other people to follow him, he's like the Pied Piper."

Cohen sees JoRide as a way to provide for Joey's future: when he ages out of the school system, he can still be a part of the business, showing people how to ride the bikes.

Cohen maintains that from the beginning, JoRide was all Joey's idea. "I think that Joey hit on something without even knowing it, and I just took it to the next level."

"It's amazing what you can learn when you watch your child," Cohen said. "Take the time, see what they want, and go after that."

Contributed by Nora Long

Career Day with Lisa Sullivan, M.D.

"Even though I am 17, I have been worrying already if I want to go into medicine because it seems like such a time-consuming experience. But after reading your answers, I feel a little more confident that both career and family are a possibility." – A.G. Lake Braddock Secondary School Class of 2011.

"A.G." e-mailed a request for this interview, not knowing that I was an alumna of her high school in northern Va. It's a small world.

AG: Describe an average day.

LS: For optimal balance, I try to "work" only during business hours and keep after hours and Wednesdays for my family. I've set my own schedule to be from 8:30am-5:30pm on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, and 11am-5:30pm on Friday. I also work one Saturday morning shift a month. It's all "outpatient" in one of my two offices.

There are very few hospital consults anymore due to the wonderful invention of hospitalists – doctors that care for my patients while in the hospital. Also, I have limited interruptions at home because I employ a triage nurse to screen patient calls after hours. She handles most of the little stuff so I can focus on being a mom at home.

AG: What do you like most about your job?

LS: Allergy/Immunology is a field where you can objectively find out what is ailing someone and either fix the problem, or help them manage it very well. It's super rewarding and almost everyone is happy with the result.

It took many years to build, but I live a dream. After graduating from high school, I started with nothing except a good upbringing and education! We had a big family and no money for college. I used lots of loans and worked three jobs at a time to pay my way for college, med school, wedding, etc. It took a long time with loads of work, planning, and commitment to get here. After years of little sleep, many pager calls, and endless hospital rounds as a resident, fellow, pediatrician, and allergist in another group, I have finally broken free and am my own boss. I'm successful too, despite the economic downturn. Dedication pays off.

AG: Why is it important to you that people get tested for allergies?

LS: Allergy testing objectively identifies allergic triggers for patients with ear, nose, throat, eye, sinus, gut, skin, cough, headache, breathing, and immune problems. This allows me to design a patient specific therapy that will work. Allergy pills and shots only work for allergic people. We must use other therapies to treat the "non-allergic" types.

Testing is most important in food, penicillin, latex, and insect sting allergies because it helps identify and manage a life-threatening condition called anaphylaxis. Testing can also prove that the problem isn't caused by these things, allowing for a full diet and peace of mind.

AG: Do you think there will ever be a complete cure for allergies?

LS: That's an interesting question and depends on perspective. I'm sure that modern science will somehow come up with a way to reverse the "atopic march" (development of allergy), but it can lead to a "butterfly effect" with an unwanted outcome somewhere else.

The best cure for allergies is to prevent them in the first place. We are a completely artificial society and our immune system doesn't know what to do with itself. Simply put, our bodies have not evolved into the American way.

AG: How do you think the field of being an allergist is changing?

LS: The field of allergy and immunology is always changing because there is so much to discover about the body and the immune system. This year is the 100th anniversary of allergy testing and shots, and immunologists still have no idea how they work. We just know that they do. Even basic biology has changed since I was at Lake Braddock in the '80s. Your teachers may remember the extinct one gene one polypeptide theory!

We haven't even begun to understand the very basics of our existence. I'm sure that your future career in medicine will be completely different from mine, but the premise of helping people live to their fullest potential will remain the same.

Lisa Sullivan, M.D. specializes in Pediatric and Adult Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology, with offices in Buffalo Grove and Gurnee. Reach her at lisasullivanmd.com.



LOCAL FLAVOR

Area Farmer's Markets

Deerfield

Saturdays, June 18-Oct. 15, 7am-12:30pm
Metra Commuter Lot, Deerfield Road and Robert York Ave., Deerfield

Glencoe

Saturdays, June 11-October 29, 8am-1pm
Village Court at Hazel Avenue, Glencoe

Glenview

Saturdays, June 25-Oct. 8, 8am-12pm
Wagner Farm, 1510 Wagner Road, Glenview
glenviewfarmersmarket.org

Northbrook

Wednesdays, June 22-Oct. 12, 7am-1pm
Our Lady of the Brook, 3700 Dundee Road, Northbrook

Northfield

Saturdays, May 28-Oct. 22
7:30am-12:30pm
6 Happ Road, Northfield

Ravinia

Wednesdays, June 8 thru Oct. 26
7am-1pm
Dean Ave. between Roger Williams and St. Johns, Highland Park
raviniafarmersmarket.com

Wilmette French Market

Saturdays through October
8am-1pm
Village Center
1200 Wilmette Ave., Wilmette

Mundelein

Fridays, June 3-October 14
3pm-7pm
SW corner of Park St & Seymour Ave

Highwood

Wednesdays Through August 31
4pm-9pm
17 Highwood Ave.

Buffalo Grove

Sundays Through October 16
8am-12:30pm
Mike Rylko Community Park, 951 McHenry

