

# **A GIFT SHE WILL NEVER FORGET: Sharon Leonard gets surprise electric bike from her Edwardsville '80 classmates**

by Brian Munoz  
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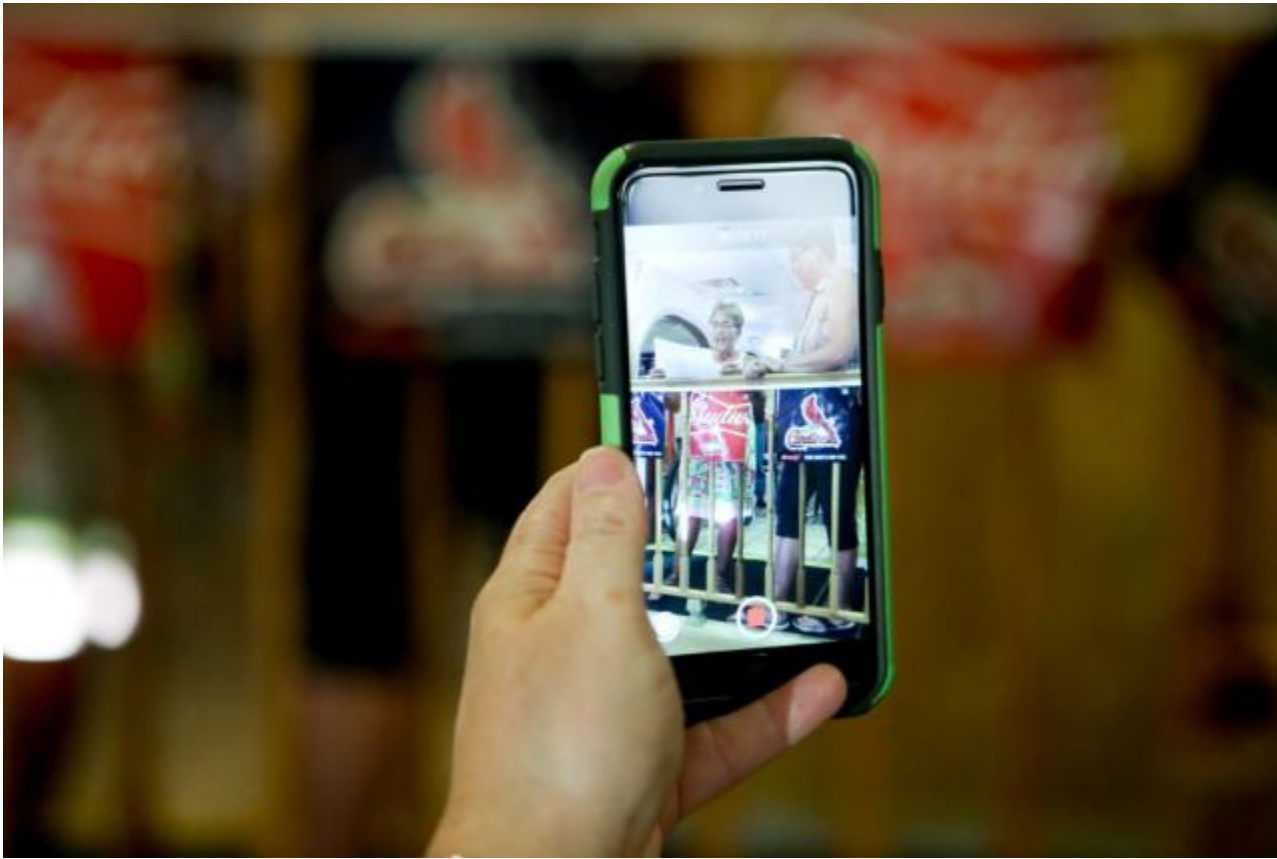


**EDWARDSVILLE - TheEdwardsville High School Class of 1980** has a surprise, and it's much bigger than who the DJ will be at their next class reunion.

For the past few weeks, the tight-knit bunch have been raising money to surprise one of their classmates who has been battling cancer, **Sharon Leonard**, with an electric bike to keep her spirits lifted and passion for riding ignited while she continues fighting.

Diagnosed with stage-four colon cancer six years ago, Sharon was taking a brief break from her chemotherapy treatments when she found out that the cancer that had metastasized into her lungs was growing. An avid bike rider, this bad news meant that all of her energy would be devoted to winning the fight against her aggressive cancer instead of hitting the trails with her bike.

This is where the altruistic alum come in. After watching a video of Sharon updating her loved ones on the new obstacle in her uphill battle, classmates **Sharon McBride** and **Susan Coffey** had the idea to raise money to buy their friend an electric bike so that she could still enjoy riding even when her energy levels were low during treatments. "We've always bonded over our love for biking, and I didn't want her to have to give up something she enjoys doing," says Sharon McBride. Within minutes of a Facebook post going out to the class of 1980 asking for help, Tigers living near and far were all on board and ready to do whatever they could to make Sharon's dream a reality.



The class has not only raised enough money to buy a top-notch electric bike for Sharon from **The Cyclery in Edwardsville**, which they gave her at a surprise party last night, but will also wrote her a check for more than \$1,000 to go toward her expensive treatments. The self-proclaimed “**Sharon’s Angels**” took their fundraising efforts one step further, and with the help of **Linda Cassens**, has sent Sharon to the **Mary Crowley Research Center in Dallas** to get more information on how to treat her advanced-stage cancer.

Nearly 36 years after graduating together, this class has no intention of growing apart. “We’re ready for our next project,” laughs **Denise Gualdoni**.

**(ALL PHOTOS BY BRIAN MUNOZ)**







**Here are the comments from different class members at the gathering on Friday night:**

**Denise Gauldoni of Edwardsville, Class of 1980:** “I’ve known Sharon for about 40 years, we all went to high school together. A classmate messaged another one and said 'Sharon has been diagnosed with stage 4 cancer and she loves to ride bikes. So why don’t we get together and get her a bike?’ So in two days we had raised close to \$3,500. We made a Facebook page and started inviting everyone and soon after the donations started coming in. The reason that we chose to buy an electrical bike was because she likes to cycle but during chemo therapy she might get to a point to where she’s tired and she can just turn her bike on and ride without getting tired. In the midst of all of this, Laurie and I were able to make some contacts to get to the Mary Crowley research center in Dallas, Tx., to be evaluated and potentially have a clinical trial.”

**Bob McManus of Dallas, Tx., Class of 1980:** “I know Sharon from high school. The girls started the Facebook page and it really just blew up from there. The classmates that I have are awesome, so I decided to help. They’re not just school mates, they’re family.”

**Ann Alvers, of Edwardsville, Class of 1980:** “I am so proud of my class and it’s just overwhelming. loves to ride backs, and with her having doing treatments again, one of our classmates mentioned getting an electric bike. We created a Facebook page, “Biking for Sharon” and it wasn’t on there very long and we all of a sudden started getting donations. Two and a half weeks later, we’re here today.”

**Todd Shaw, of Edwardsville, member of Alison’s Hope foundation, Class of 1980:** “The Mary Crowley Institute was started by a lady named Mary Crowley about 30 years ago. They specialize in investigational gene therapies. They look at tumors and they map DNA using blood types and they are able to develop vaccines for certain cancers. They have done that in conjunction with the FDA and drug companies for phase 1 trials. They specialize in translational therapy which means once they figure out that they have a vaccine that’s working they put that message onto the cells of your immune system. That allows your immune system to recognize cancer cells so takes them out. What Mary Crowley’s research has been able to do is give other cancer centers information on what works and what doesn’t work. Alison’s Hope foundation also also works with Hospice of Southern Illinois and Edwardsville Neighbors in Need, to help with the same kind of goal.”



**Barb Anderson, of Edwardsville, Class of 1980:** “Sharon, you have no idea how hard it was to keep this a secret from you for 2.5 weeks. It was a blast from when the ball (bike) got rolling to this special night that you are finding out how loved you are. I remember at the 30<sup>th</sup> meeting you were in the ladies restroom at Fox Creek and your lip was bleeding. That is when you told me about the cancer. I love your fight, your silliness, your stories when we get together, and your love for life, your family and your special little angel (granddaughter). You are such an inspiration. Keep up the fight. I hope you enjoy your new wheels as much as I have enjoyed working with the committee on making it happen. I can’t wait to hear about your first adventure on the e-bike. The class of ’80 has been amazing. Love ya.”



**Sharon Leonard, of Edwardsville, Class of 1980:** “I am overwhelmed. just didn’t even know a thing.

“This group of girls and I get together for dinner every couple of months. They mentioned the other day, ‘What about July 15<sup>th</sup>? Everyone meet at El Maguey.’ I said, ‘Yeah, that sounds good!’ checked with me to make sure that it was okay and to make sure that it was a chemotherapy off week, to make sure I would feel okay. I met a few friends outside; nothing out of the normal. Then, I saw a few of strange faces, people I

normally don't usually see around. They said they had called to come with so I said, 'Sure, well let's go in,' and then of course, I walked in and everyone starts clapping. It's crazy you see so many people that you know all at once, I just couldn't take it all in.

"I was totally surprised and I start looking and I see a few of the people that helped in getting me to Mary Crowley and I see other people in the crowd and I think 'Oh my gosh, what is going on?' and my heart started racing, I was sweating, I started crying; I was honestly a hot mess from there.



"I was diagnosed almost 6 years ago with rectal cancer and went through radiation and chemo. I finished chemotherapy June of 2011 and in September of 2011, they saw suspicious spots in my lungs. I had another cat scan done in December of 2011 and after seeing more spots showing up I went to go see a lung surgeon where he told me 'I'm 99.9 percent sure that the cancer has metastasized in your lungs,' and I have been fighting it ever since. It took me from a Stage 2 cancer to a Stage 4 cancer. I just have been doing chemotherapy off and on including trying clinical trials. I was told a couple of months that their treatment wasn't working and I needed to look at other options. I wasn't going to give up that easy, and my doctor suggested a couple of locations as well. I was looking at another facility in Texas and one in Boston but you always have to think about the cost associated with the traveling. Do we drive? Do we fly? There were a lot of things to factor in, so I said that we would figure it out. Next thing you

know I'm getting phone calls from friends and now, less than two weeks later, I have airplane tickets, my medical records transferred, and I go to Mary Crowley on Tuesday. I'm completely blown away.



"In 2008, 2009, I was doing 40-mile round trips. Then I became sick. When I went over the first time they told me 'How are you sick? You're so toned and fit!'

"It was overwhelming, but I'm excited because my doctor said, 'I'm at the end of the line for what they have here in St. Louis. I'm not just going to give up.' We're going to go down there and meet with one of the top doctors there, Dr. John Nemunaitis. We'll see what they have to offer, clinical trials may not only help me but help other patients.

"Besides that, I love to ride my bike, that's just one of the things that has given me a lot of joy so when I get an opportunity to get out there, I do. My husband is always saying "Don't overdo it, because when I get going I forget that we have to go back." So this gives you that extra boost or if I want to get out there and ride even though I may be feeling 'eh,' I can turn on the battery powered motor.



