

On A Different Track



Joseph Giret QC took time away from the Bar to compete in the Haute Route on behalf of Parkinson's UK. He describes his journey ...

Charity is a vital part of oiling otherwise creaking joints in our society and community at all levels, including bursaries on the one hand and the sick and needy on the other. Charity works with business today on an unprecedented scale; it is a valuable partnership for a business because of its positive projection. Charity begins at home for sure, but most assuredly ends with the business end of finding the cash. This is my story of a fundraising campaign I ran on behalf of the charity Parkinson's UK. It was a season-long, full-on bike racing campaign to raise as much funding as possible and to raise awareness of Parkinson's.

I joined the Archer Road Club (same as Bradley Wiggins) in my teens and was rarely off the bike. I started racing bikes on the track at Paddington and closed circuit at Crystal Palace aged 13, 14 and 15, never varying in my desire to be a Pro bike rider. I trained hard then. I am still training, riding and racing my bike with the same passion as ever. However a career in law put paid to any further ambition to compete on the international stage.

In my early and later teens, I helped out at the North Kensington Neighbourhood Law Centre in the Golborne Road, Notting Hill which is where I grew up. A career in law was my new focus. Taking Silk stopped me in my tracks and caused me to reflect on where I was going next. At the Criminal Bar I saw my role as

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PHOTO CAPTIONS

1. Joseph and his son Pascal in Parkinson's UK cycling kit at the start of a stage in Annecy.
2. Joseph sprinting to the finish of the third stage on the summit of L'Alpe D'Huez.

something stopping just short of being a social worker and lawyer combined, which suited my desire to care for people. I'd got to the level I wanted to in my career. Then a bombshell: a very close friend was diagnosed with Parkinson's for which there is currently no cure. She was also a practising barrister (a QC now retired), and I quickly understood that tea and sympathy were not going to be enough of an effort on my part. I wanted to do more.

Parkinson's affects so many in our society (127,000 in the UK), all at differing rates and with different effects. It is a progressive neurological condition. It is not commonly understood how many young people are in fact affected and diagnosed. Although most people who get Parkinson's are aged 50 or over, younger people can get it too. One in 20 is under the age of 40.

I had become aware of the 'Haute Route', a cycling event that appealed yet that I had dismissed as being too long, too expensive, and too demanding of time; a racing event over seven days with some pro riders, the route being from Geneva to Nice taking in a huge number of iconic climbs used in the Tour de France. 780k, 19 mountains, 21,000 metres of climbing, and labelled "the toughest, highest, hardest professional event for amateurs." A 'mini' Tour de France if you like. Then came the press release that seven new places had been released solely for Charity riders: those who

wished should apply with their plans, projections, and proposals; each of the seven days would be dedicated to one charity getting international press coverage and exposure for the charity. I applied and was successful and would now focus on the one task. Next the training. Endless, painful. I visited the Alps four times in the build up, to train and race in the mountains, twice with my tent and bike. I competed in no less than six events for amateurs in Europe (Paris-Roubaix, London-Paris, both editions of ASO's Etape du Tour, Haute Route and the Alpine Challenge). I never stopped doing hill reps in the Chilterns and general training rides of 100 miles or more. All this between January 2012 and the event which happened from 19 to 25 August 2012 plus one further event in the Alps 5 to 9 September 2012. I raced all season long in Parkinson's UK livery.

I set my fundraising target high, and it was ambitious. I tried to make capital of the fact that I was a practising barrister. However I didn't achieve anything like my target. Parkinson's UK had put the weight of their publicity machine behind me and I was interviewed on BBC Radio. Their press release was picked up by a large number of local papers. People however can get tired of giving for these 'challenges'. The funds Parkinson's UK raise go towards their vital research work to find a cure and to improve the lives of those living with the condition.

Having to keep my diary clear has come at a

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significant price. There is no quick fix here save to have sympathetic clerks and solicitors - bank managers also - and a great deal of commitment. I would not have done anything differently on this rather steep and painful learning curve.

I had no hesitation, and further, positively revelled in telling people not only that I was a barrister practising at the English bar, but also that I was a Silk. My point is that in my case, the message I was putting across was that the Bar had a softer side, a caring side that enabled there to be clear divisions between the hardened advocate in a hard adversarial system and the person within who cared and shared the burdens of helping out those less fortunate in society. What is clear to me is that the Bar could and should profit from closer ties to charities through its individual members, members who might be doing more for themselves individually and for the Bar, and more importantly shouting out loud about which profession they belong to whilst doing their efforts for charity.

I am proud of my contribution to such a worthy charity, but just as proud of my profession, and making some small contribution to enhancing its image. ●

Parkinson's UK - www.parkinsons.org.uk



Joseph Giret QC www.giret.co.uk