

'Sidecar Shea's' Spectacular Day

Local girl leaves wheelchair behind for a Sunday joyride.

By Bonnie Hobbs

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Shea Megale may not be able to walk, but she sure knows how to have fun. And this past Sunday she sat in a sidecar of a Harley-Davidson, escorted by two dozen other motorcycles, and roared off for a carefree joyride on a sunny afternoon.

"She's such a sweet little girl, and seeing what she's able to do is an inspiration to all of us," said Virginia Run's Armand Mancini, who organized the ride. "She has such spirit that we all feel good just being around her." Shea, 11, also of Centreville's Virginia Run community, has SMA (spinal muscular atrophy), a rare, incurable form of muscular dystrophy. And she normally gets around in her wheelchair, aided by her trusty service dog, Mercer.



A crowd of supporters came out Sunday for the Ride With Shea Megale, 11, in Virginia Run.

But on Sunday, she was the passenger of honor during the fourth annual Ride for Shea. It's not a fund-raiser, but it definitely is a smile-bringer.

MANCINI MET Shea four years ago, when his son Matt was a Virginia Run Elementary sixth-grader and Shea was a second-grader there. Mancini is part of the Fairfax HOG (Harley Owners Group), so he got his fellow Harley riders — plus friends who ride other models — to join with him in showing the young girl a good time on a motorcycle.

The ride was such a smashing success that it became a tradition and, this year, Matt Mancini — now a sophomore at Westfield High — helped his dad organize it. And what an awesome sight it was when 25 riders on 16 gleaming motorcycles came cruising up Shea's street to pick her up. "I've known her since she was a wee, little thing," said Armand Mancini. "And when we first started the ride, I used to strap her on my lap. This time, she was in the sidecar of a beautiful, Ultra-Glide Harley driven by Chris Maher of Little Rocky Run. He's a friend from Centreville Baptist Church."

With Shea garbed in a "do-rag," sunglasses and helmet, she looked right at home as the group of motorcyclists traveled down Route 29 to Patriot Harley-Davidson in Fairfax. There, Shea was greeted by the staff and looked at all the motorcycles.

"And I got a new pair of sunglasses — it was really neat," she said. "They also gave me a whole bag of things, including a leash for Mercer and a baseball cap with a heart, two motorcycles and the words, 'Harley Girl,' on it. They were very generous there."

Although he usually accompanies her everywhere, Mercer stayed home this time. "He didn't like the noise of the motorcycles," said Shea. "He ran away from them."

But she loved her ride. "It was a lot of fun and, in the sidecar, I had the perfect amount of wind on me," she said. "My hair didn't blow everywhere. And the turns were a little more wild, being lower to the ground."

Leaving Fairfax, the group zoomed back up Route 29 and headed for lunch at *Ciro's New York Pizza* in the Centreville Square Shopping Center. There, they were joined by Shea's parents, Megan and Larry Megale, and older sister Kelley. (Her brother Matthew wanted to be there, but couldn't). And Shea was treated like royalty by owner *Ciro D'Agostino*.

"Ciro said, 'I want you to choose anything you want to eat. Whatever you'd like, I'll make it for you,'" said Shea. "So I ordered the ziti, and he gave me a special, fancy fork and a decorated plate. Everybody else had regular forks and paper plates. He also put on special, Italian music for me."

She said the food was "really good" and, after eating it all, she was stuffed. "But he kept bringing me more and more things to eat," she said. "He brought French fries, ice cream, cannoli and a special dessert of his own that wasn't on the menu. It was coffee-flavored with chocolate ice cream and was very unique and spectacular."

Then, topping things off — literally, as it turned out — *D'Agostino* brought out a hunk of pizza dough and started twirling it around. Meanwhile, said Shea, "Mr. Mancini was eating the special dessert." But *D'Agostino* was the floor show.

"Ciro started making the pizza rounder and rounder, and he spun it into the air several times and caught it," said Shea. "Then he said, 'OK, this is my finale,' and he threw it up into the air one more time, and it landed on Mr. Mancini's head, and everybody laughed."

"Ciro and his staff were wonderful," said Mancini. "They just kept bringing pizza after pizza for everyone." And Mancini didn't at all mind being the landing site for *D'Agostino's* flying saucer of dough. "Anything that puts a smile on Shea's face or makes her laugh, it's well worth it," he said.

In previous years, the motorcyclists took Shea for ice cream, so this was the first time they all had lunch together, and *D'Agostino* was delighted to host them.

"It's something I always wanted to do because I love that family so much; they're good people," he said. "I've known Shea since she was a baby." And knowing her circumstances, he said, "breaks my heart because I have my own three daughters. I had to hold back my tears Sunday when she tried to talk to me in an Italian accent like I have. She's very special to me." *Ciro's* restaurant is popular with local families and youth sports teams and, explained *D'Agostino*, "I'm always having children here who are able to play. So I'll do anything I can to help make it possible for children who can't play, to play in the future."

He said the "special dessert" was actually tiramisu without alcohol, plus chocolate ice cream. And he stressed how much he appreciates Shea's parents, teachers, neighbors, friends and motorcycle buddies for everything they do for her. "Bravo to all those people who make her so happy every day," said *D'Agostino*. "They're doing a good job, and that makes my heart joyful." After lunch, the motorcyclists drove along Compton Road, taking the long way to Shea's house



Ciro D'Agostino, owner of *Ciro's New York Pizza*, prepared an Italian feast for Shea Megale and her parents.

so she could have a little extra time to enjoy her ride before returning home. "It was great," said Mancini. "We had a blast."

"It gets better every year," said Shea. "At the end, we all hugged and kissed and said goodbye. I told them, 'We own the road, but you own my heart.' Then I watched Mr. Mancini and the others drive away, and I went inside and took a deep breath and collapsed — I was tired." Grateful for the kindness shown to her child, Megan Megale said Shea's whole adventure was "so incredible for her because it just enhances her life." And the motorcycle ride, she said, is "something we could never offer her."

"When they show up, it's a given that she can do it," continued Megale. "But it's something that would otherwise be restrictive for her. Anyone that aids me in making her life better, I'm deeply indebted to. And I hope very much to someday be able to do that for someone else."