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DOIN' IT FOR THE (SICK) KIDS
Mark Cafe has never been one to shy away from a challenge and this week he will cycle 380km from Bourke to Narromine to raise funds for the Royal Far West Children's Health Scheme.
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Mark Cafe's participation in the 2025 Ride for Country Kids is one of personal resonance. Picture by Gareth Gardner

Childhood trauma that's motivating a ride

Samantha Newsam

Letters sent from his mum to the Royal Far West facility in Manly, and vica versa have provided Mark with some insight into his time there. Picture by Gareth Gardner

MARK Cafe was too young to remember anything of the accident that led to him spending months on end in hospital, hundreds of kilometres from his family. Or much of his time at the Royal Far West facility in Manly.

But he has never forgotten what the charity did for him.

And so on Thursday, the former combat specialist will hop on his bike and ride 380km from Bourke to Narromine to raise vital funds, and commemorate 100 years of the Royal Far West Children's Health Scheme.

It's a cause "near and dear" to the Tamworth father and grandfather's heart.

When he was 11 months old, he crawled up and grabbed some coal from the firebox, which was heating water in the copper boiler (in the 60s, that was how households got hot water).

Suffering second-degree burns to both of his hands, his injuries would require multiple trips to Sydney for surgery and subsequent stays at the Centre for Country Kids.

The second youngest of seven children, with five older siblings to look after, it wasn't feasible for his mum or dad to go down with him.

So he would be put on the train at Wylong, accompanied by what the hospital called "transport attendants".

"They would get you on the train and take you all the way into Central [station] and then take you over to Manly and would drop you off at the hospital. Then they'd do the same in reverse," Mark said.

Sometimes he would be down there for months, with little contact with his family besides the odd letter.

He recently obtained some of those.

A few years ago, he was in Sydney with his wife and son, and his family, and on a whim they decided to head over to Manly.

"I've never really thought about it too much, but when we got to Manly, I thought, I wonder how the hospitals are going?" he said.

It was the first time he'd been back to see the centre since he was discharged for the final time.

"I just broke down," he said of walking inside. "There were all of these black and white prints that are now adorning the walls. It was like a time warp, and I was just overcome with emotion."

Afterwards, the nurse who had given Mark the tour told him they would have his records and if he wanted, she could do some research for him.

Not long after, he received a collection of letters between his mum and the hospital.

It was like piecing together a part of his childhood.

In one of them, his mum writes how "he didn't recognise us the last time he came home."

Another, she asks if he is going to be able to be home for Christmas.

"From what I can gather...I spent Christmas there, I had measles there, and I started kindergarten there," Mark said.

Some were from the hospital to his mum, letting her know how he was going.

He still has some scarring and can't straighten his fingers, but the injury has never hindered him, he said.

Before enlisting in the Army, he was a painter, decorator, and sign writer by trade. He also, in his younger years, played a lot of rugby league.

All things that require substantial dexterity.

Even still, it hasn't assuaged him of the guilt he feels about what happened, on behalf of his mum.

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Mark Cafe on his Royal Far West experience

It was one of the reasons he signed up to do the Ride for Country Kids. It's his way of trying "to bury that demon for her".

He also wanted to give back and help other kids in a similar situation to what he was.

He started his preparation for the ride 11 weeks ago - before that, Mark, who in 2023 won the Cara Hickson Award for Special Achievement at the Tamworth Regional Sports Awards, hadn't been on a bike for around 30 years.

He had prepared himself that he was going to be "in the hurt locker" for the first few weeks, but confessed to moments where he questioned what he'd gotten himself into.

Returning from his first ride, it was all he could do to just lay on the lawn.

And there were many days when he'd come back and lie on the couch with ice packs.

But never one to shy away from a challenge, he pushed through.

Commencing in Bourke, the ride will then head to Cobar - the hometown of Royal Far West founder, the Reverend Stanley Drummond - before continuing on to Nyngan and finishing in Narromine on Saturday.

You can support Mark's endeavours via his rider profile at *www.rideforcountrykids.com.au/fundraisers/markcafe*.