

A memorable ride: Pan-Mass Challenge founder Billy Starr shows no signs of slowing down



Billy Starr, founder and executive director of the Pan-Mass Challenge (PMC) takes a spin outside their Needham, MA offices.

W. MARC BERNSAU

Billy Starr

Age: 66

Residence: Wellesley, MA

Family: Wife Meredith Beaton-Starr; daughters Hannah and Sophia

Education: Bachelor's degree from University of Denver in 1973; Master's in education from Northeastern University in 1978; honorary doctorate from Babson College in 1998 and honorary degrees from Bay Path College in 2008 and Salem State University in 2014.

The Pan-Mass Challenge bills itself as the “most successful athletic fundraising event in the world” and, true to its word, the bike-a-thon event every year seems to outdo itself in terms of money raised for cancer treatment and research. Last year’s event raised a record \$51 million for The Jimmy Fund, to bring its total contributions for Dana-Farber Cancer Institute to \$598 million since 1980. The Business Journal’s [Joe Halpern](#) recently caught up with [Billy Starr](#), the founder and executive director for the Pan-Mass Challenge, to get the latest on this August’s event and his reflections on 38 memorable years in the nonprofit industry.

Start off by bringing us up-to-date on preparation for this year's Pan-Mass Challenge event.

Registration opened the first week of January and we're at about 5,500 people registered. We're anticipating a 6,500-person event this year.

We kicked off our \$52 million fundraising goal in January with our newly revamped Pan-Mass Challenge Winter Cycle. It's an indoor spinning event that's now in its third year, and we moved it from the Everybody Fights club (in the Seaport) to Fenway Park this year. It was a huge success. We had over 1,000 riders there on stationary bikes. The Winter Cycle is a great gateway into the PMC weekend. ... We are at \$2.75 million (raised) right now, which is 10 percent up year-to-date, on our way to our 2018 goal of \$52 million.

The PMC bike event raised a record \$51 million last year. Were you surprised to have reach that amount?

It was a surprise to everyone, including to myself, that we were able to grow from \$47 million to \$51 million in one year. I've got my finger on the pulse of the money after all these years, and even I was surprised by it.

Why was that?

I don't know how you can possibly budget that kind of increase from a participant who's been with you on average for five to eight years taking their average fundraising up 12 to 13 percent. People typically peak fundraising capacity each year 2 to 3 percent, not 12 and 13 percent. That was an unexpected surprise.

What do you owe to that incredible one-year growth?

I think there were a lot of things responsible for that – having the right cause and the right event, and then add to that great branding, great PR, and great media partners in Boston. We also are working with great sophisticated fundraising tools and our riders know how to use those tools.

Is there a ceiling for fundraising for your event?

The PMC certainly has physical limitations and capacities. For beginners, you need to run a safe bike event and you can't keep adding riders or else it won't stay safe. Then another thing is that three of our four major hub sites are surrounded by water, including Sturbridge, which is on a lake. So, there isn't many more people we can squeeze into one of those areas. I often joke what the PMC needs is a landfill in an aircraft carrier. Point is, we do have our limits. Can we grow by another \$50 million? I don't think so, unless we ended up nationalizing our Winter Cycling program. That certainly can grow things, but we'll need a partner to do it.

What, in your view, makes the Pan-Mass Challenge so popular?

Your PMC rider is a very committed individual, very motivated, very heartfelt. My constituency has embraced it. They love the training, they love the teams, they love the relationship building it. I always wanted the weekend to be that way. That was my vision. It's about creating relationships for life. It's a powerful cause with incredibly passionate participants and volunteers. We share all the ups, the downs, the progress.

How much has the Pan-Mass Challenge evolved over time?

Honestly, when the PMC first came on the landscape (in 1980), fundraising was all about black-tie events, bingo nights and cultivating a high-end donor event program. It's now a \$5 billion industry and the biggest single events all feature bike rides now. That says a lot. It validates everything we've done all these years.

Was there a game-changing moment for the Pan-Mass Challenge?

I think it was 1997, when we put in the credit card rule for donations. That was a game-changer for us because up until then we had to trust that riders would give us what they promised, and we'd have to chase them down. The first thing that happened when we went to credit card donations is, my delinquency rate went from 17 percent down to 3 percent in one year.

Have you thought about writing a book?

Yeah, but I don't think I could do it. I first would have to step away from my life and involvement with it, which I have no plans on doing. I am not ready to retire. But do I think there's a story here? Yes, I do. It's a great story. Would it be a better story if I stole all the money and went to Mexico? It would be a better story. Very sellable, right? (Laughs)