**It’s Been a Good Ride, And Will Be Again**

Cabot Mentoring to skip its Ride The Ridges fundraiser this year

by Will Lindner, Washington Electric Co-op

*Washington Electric Co-op is a sponsor of Cabot Mentoring. Reprinted with the permission of WEC.*

An exhilarating bike ride along the dirt roads and the trails that wind up, over, and along the hills cradling the village of Cabot, Vermont, is an excellent way to cap off an unmatchable Vermont summer. That’s especially so when you know what’s waiting at the end of the ride – a celebratory, communal meal with fellow riders and townsfolk, appetites whetted by exertion, featuring healthy foods produced locally by artisans attuned to the Vermont ethic of natural foods prepared with dedication and skill.

This has been how gravel-riding enthusiasts in our area have marked the cusp of fall for the past seven years. “Gravel riding,” a fairly recent bike-adventuring classification, weaves together the rural terrain of unpaved roads, pathways, and mountain trails. The annual event, known as Cabot Ride the Ridges, is held on the second Sunday of September. Jen Boucher, a member of the organizing committee, describes it, aptly, as “a supported ride with a great localvore meal at the end.”

By “supported ride,” she means that signs are placed periodically so riders can be sure they won’t get lost; there are aid stations that provide water refills, snacks, and drinks to replenish the electrolytes the body needs for safe exertion in warm weather. Participants can choose a 10-k ride, a 30-k ride, and 60- and 100-k rides that attract the most dedicated cyclists. The aid stations on the longer routes provide tools, a tire pump and someone to help with basic repairs if they’re needed.

Actually, the event isn’t restricted to bicyclists. On the 10-k route, Boucher says, “People can participate how they wish, running or walking… We even have a local rider who does it on a unicycle!”

(*That* would be something to behold, considering that, according to a website associated with Cabot Ride the Ridges, the routes feature “amazing scenery, challenging climbs, and exhilarating downhills.”)

“It started out, seven years ago, with 30 riders participating,” says Boucher. “Now it’s more like 200. We’ve had people from as far away as Philadelphia and North Carolina; there’s a gravel-riding online network, and ours is known now as a pretty great ride.”

One regular rider, she says, has even ridden in the Tour de France. Boucher admits, however, that he’s a local resident.

**Two important details!**

There are two additional, very important, things to point out about Cabot Ride the Ridges.

The first is that it’s not just an eagerly anticipated community event that renews the spirit of cohesion in this small central Vermont town each year; it’s a fundraiser for Cabot Mentoring, a program begun several years before anyone dreamed of a bike ride to help support it.

Cabot Mentoring has been a frequent recipient of donations from Washington Electric Cooperative’s Community Fund, the Co-op’s program, inaugurated in 2003, that aggregates voluntary donations by WEC members of their annual capital credit returns, and with them provides grants to local nonprofits and community groups that are engaged in efforts, large and small, that improve the quality of life in our region.

While similar programs often target at-risk youth, Cabot Mentoring welcomes any and all Cabot kids interested in experiencing a mentor-mentee relationship. Furthermore, it’s born out of a belief that it’s not just children who benefit from these connections. “Cabot Mentoring,” its website explains, “seeks to strengthen the Cabot community with intergenerational friendships. We provide opportunities for adults to share their passions and connect with the younger generations, and opportunities for youth to expand their interests, practice relationship skills, and have a trusted friend from an older generation.”

“The goal,” Jen Boucher elaborates, “is to strengthen community ties, to give kids adult connections and friends who are outside their family. Maybe their parents aren’t interested in the same things they are, but an adult mentor can share and encourage those interests. It’s been shown that mentoring strengthens kids’ resilience and their ability to get through tough times, or to get through school and feel supported.

“Because sometimes,” she admits, “it’s hard to be a kid in a tiny town.”

There are two mentoring formats in Cabot. Through community-based mentoring the adult and mentee get together a few times a month and pursue common interests, anything from hiking to fishing to cooking, from playing games to creating art. Mentors and mentees sometimes team up with others and do things together. In school-based mentoring, the meetings are scheduled weekly. “These can be particularly helpful for a child who might be struggling in school,” Boucher explains. “It adds a bright spot in their day, so they have something to look forward to.”

These benefits are what attracted Washington Electric Co-op to the Cabot program. “We’ve been proud to be an annual supporter,” says WEC General Manager Patty Richards, who facilitates the selection of Community Fund recipients by a Co-op committee. “The Cabot mentoring program provides the kind of personal support that helps our kids get through difficult times, or thrive as they pursue new interests. Our dollars also support the volunteers and staff who are an integral part of this trusted and inspiring organization. When it comes to supporting the youth of our local communities, count us in!”

Cabot, though, is a small town, and there aren’t always enough adults eager to become mentors. “Some new adults had just signed up when Covid happened,” Boucher says. The virus shut down the school; community-based mentoring, though, has continued, through outdoor activities, video chats, and similar safe practices.

Which brings us to the “second very important thing” noted above: For 2020, Cabot Ride the Ridges has been cancelled. “At first,” Jen Boucher recalls, “we felt like a bike ride seems to be a pretty safe thing to do, so let’s think about how we can make it happen. But then one of the organizers decided he was not excited about a lot of people coming into our town” – an influx starkly at odds with the safety-related protocols of the Covid era – “and quickly others realized they felt the same way. There’s so much fear, and we didn’t want to create more discomfort.”

Fortunately, the bike ride, which raises money primarily through rider registrations after the costs of the event have been met, is not the only funding stream for Cabot Mentoring. Corporate donors, such as WEC, help stabilize the program. No alternative fundraising schemes are being planned.

“It looks like we have the money to maintain it during the coming year,” Boucher predicts. “The mentors are continuing their connections with the mentees, and the program coordinator, Susan Socks, is continuing her work, making opportunities happen and connecting mentors with interested children.”

**Village people**

More than just a bike ride, more than just a fundraiser, Cabot Ride the Ridges is a daylong celebration of community, thanks to the efforts of small businesses – particularly in the culinary vein – that are characteristic of the region’s culture: wood-fired “farm-to-table” pizza from Woodbelly Pizza in Montpelier; cheeses provided by Jasper Hill Farm and Vermont Creamery, and healthy offerings from Burtt’s Apple Orchard, the Magic Spoon Bakery, Rhapsody Natural Foods, and Kingdom Harvest Kombucha. Like Washington Electric, other locally rooted banks and businesses appreciate the value of Cabot Mentoring and chip in to support the program.

Boucher and her neighbors have made their peace with taking 2020 off from Cabot Ride the Ridges.“But we are absolutely planning on doing the bike ride next year,” she says “It’s a great way to get together and to bring more people into our town. We’re completely exhausted when we’re done, but we always look back on it and say, ‘It’s been a good day.’”

**To learn more, or to donate to Cabot Mentoring: www.**[**cabotmentoring.org**](http://cabotmentoring.org)

**To learn more about Ride the Ridges: www.ridetheridges.net**