Ohio Bike-a-thon Celebrity Faked His Cancer to Get Donations

John Looker was once the face of Pelotonia—until bikers and cancer patients started asking questions.

August 8, 2019 By Casey Halter

John Looker was once the star fundraiser of an Ohio bike-a-thon that raised millions of dollars every year to help fight cancer. But last year, people started raising questions about the Columbus, Ohio–based cyclist—and discovered that Looker had been faking his cancer diagnosis all along.

As The New York Times reports, the now nationally infamous cancer-faking controversy centers on Pelotonia, an annual bicycle ride in Ohio that benefits cancer research. Looker's rise to fame in the charity event began in August 2011, when he became that year's spokesman.

Ironically, the first Pelotonia, in 2009, was kicked off by Lance Armstrong—a few years before a doping scandal ruined his reputation. At the time, Pelotonia had over 5,000 participants, each required to drum up at least $1,200 for the event, which raised nearly $25 million. This year, Pelotonia is expected to bring in more than $194 million for cancer research.

Until last year, Looker was one of the star fundraisers of the event—known both in his hometown of Newark, Ohio and online as sort of a cult figure in the cancer community. Since 2011, Looker had been telling fellow riders that he had Stage IV (terminal) brain cancer. He and his followers, known online as Lookers Hookers, logged hundreds of miles raising money for Pelotonia on his behalf. Looker sold cookies and organized garage sales for the event. He also actively reached out to cancer patients and their families to give support and advice.

But to some, things didn't seem quite right. For example, one social media follower questioned why his tumors never metastasized but simply moved around—or why every spring before Pelotonia registration began, Looker's cancer would return.

As it turns out, the organizers of Pelotonia had had suspicions about Looker's health for years. But regulations on patient privacy prevented them from contacting his doctors. In August 2018, a group of Looker's Hookers also became suspicious, confronted him and uncovered the hoax.

One year and several lawsuits later, it has been revealed that Looker, in fact, never had cancer. He

also admitted to taking some of the money he had collected in cancer donations over the years to pay for “living expenses.” This week, the Ohio attorney general’s office announced that Looker had agreed to pay an $1,800 restitution and a $2,000 civil fine for his crimes.

Moving forward, Pelotonia says it will require all survivors featured to sign a release guaranteeing their statements are true.

To read more about why some people fake cancer online, click here.

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