



THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

July 25, 2023

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Spencer Lueders, Founder, 24 Hours of Booty and the 24 Foundation

by **Rick Handford**

Andy Dinkin introduced Spencer Leuders, a man of many talents, from great speaker to husband, father, successful entrepreneur, and soccer player for the University of South Carolina. But his biggest impact has been as the founder of the 24 Hours of Booty (perhaps the best-known charity event in Charlotte) and the 24 Foundation. For leaving a mark on his city and leaving things better than he found them, no one is better than Spencer.

“So there I was—all good stories start like that, right?” Spencer related that there he was, riding his bike on the famous 3-mile course through Myers Park affectionately known as “The Booty Loop” and thinking about how he could make a difference in the community. And it came to him that he could make an impression if he could ride his bike around the Booty Loop for 24 hours and call the event the “24 Hours of Booty”. But could he really do it?

He thought back to a time when he was growing up in Dallas, Texas, and was walking through a field recently cleared for construction of a shopping center, where he saw a limb from a weeping willow tree, still covered with green leaves, lying in the middle of the empty field. He asked his dad if it would be possible to stick this branch into the ground and have it grow into a big tree, and his dad answered, “You know, Spencer, it’s so crazy that it just might work”. And that created a feeling in him that he need not be

afraid to try new things, even if just to see what would happen. In that spirit, he decided to attempt the 24-hour ride and try to make a difference in the community, specifically in the cancer community.

Ignoring the need for such mundane things as road closures, permits, and event insurance, he proceeded to have an associate who did patent illustrations for him create a logo for the 24 Hours of Booty, with a bike rider under the title banner and big stars at either end of the banner. As his buddy Earle was a bit of a nerd, Spencer paid him for the work with Star Wars figures instead of cash. Interestingly enough, when the logo was printed on the front of t-shirts, it became apparent that the stars were located in such a way that it called attention to the attributes of persons of a certain build wearing the shirts. (He swears that this was not planned.)

So he rents an RV and parks it in front of Queens College, sets up a little 10x10 shade tent nearby with the logo on a paper banner and a box for passers-by to deposit donations, and has his family there to explain what was going on. No publicity, no fanfare, just Spencer setting off to ride around the Booty Loop, hopefully for 24 hours. He was focused on 'the what' of the ride—drinking enough, eating enough, gearing up to get the most mileage with the least effort, and being able to make it for 24 hours. He had some friends come out and join him for some laps, but really wasn't focused on 'the why' of it.

Then a fellow named Mike came riding up next to him and asked if he was the one riding the Booty Loop for 24 hours. When Spencer said, "Yep, I'm the guy", Mike responded that that was pretty cool, and explained that he was a cancer survivor. So, Spencer asked to hear his story. A while later, a woman pulls up next to him and says, "Hey, I'm Jane, and my sister is a cancer survivor". And Spencer asks to hear her story and does. Around midnight, Chip comes out and introduces himself, explains that he lost his wife to breast cancer, and rides along with him for a few laps.

At four o'clock in the morning (it was November, so it was pretty cold) another guy appears out of nowhere with minimal clothes and no gloves, exposed skin bright red from the cold, and says, "Hey, my wife's a survivor and I heard about you, and I just wanted to come out at four o'clock in the morning and ride with you." So, Spencer says that would be great, and they ride together and talk, and then suddenly he takes off and Spencer never sees him again.

While Spencer is riding by himself during the event, he is feeling that something special is going on, and he is not sure what, but it feels magical. He then showed us a picture of himself crossing the finish line, followed by a couple of buddies that came out to join him at the end, and said that there were three things that he remembers every time he sees it. First is that he has a big smile because he has achieved his goal and made it through the 24 hours. Secondly, while he was riding the 312 miles, he kept passing by the Krispy Kreme donut shop next to the Harris Teeter at Providence and Queens, and when the 'Hot Donuts Now' sign came on he had someone go and get a box of glazed donuts, and he ate six of them while he was finishing the

ride, so he was on a sugar high. But most importantly, when he finished the ride, he felt so incredibly energized and hope-filled that he wanted to be able to have other people feel that same feeling. Sharing that feeling motivated him to move forward and do it again.

With no experience in philanthropy, and no knowledge of event planning, small children with more on the way, he proceeded to get a permit, get road closure of one lane around the loop, and set up a truss at the start/finish line (two step ladders wrapped in black cloth with a banner mounted on a pipe between the two ladders). Of course, someone ran into one of the ladders and knocked the whole thing down, but there were no injuries, and the 100 riders who showed up were so energized, and survivors were there telling their stories, and a community was created on the spot. Once again, it was magical.

After the event, Spencer was getting random donations sent to his house, and he got a dollar bill attached to a note from an eleven-year-old boy named Josiah, who had lost his dad to cancer. His dad's friends had formed a team in his memory, and Josiah sent in his contribution to honor them and his dad. Spencer shared the note with one of his neighbors, who told Spencer to wait. He went into his house and came out in a couple of minutes and said, "I will match his dollar", and handed over a check for \$5,000. Pretty powerful stuff.

Spencer determined that not too many people wanted to ride for 24 hours (really nobody does, although maybe three per thousand riders do it), but that's okay because the 24 Hours of Booty is not about the ride, but about the community. He showed us a picture of the tent city erected behind Queens for the participants and supporters (named Bootyville by the riders), where people hang out and eat/drink/rest and tell stories while they are not riding. It is about the Community. He showed us pictures of a couple of the many teams of riders who come out to support the cause, including a large team comprised of doctors and nursing staff of the Levine Cancer Center, who come out and ride with the survivors that they have saved. Everybody loves it.

He showed a picture of the inside of the food tent in Bootyville. They have a midnight pizza party during the ride, and some 1,600 pieces of pizza disappear in about 15 minutes. Everybody is excited, they have been riding, and they're hungry. Some may go into the camp to rest, some go out to the loop, and some hang around in the tent and tell stories. Whatever they choose, it's all okay, because it's about community and sharing. It's about riders riding together, the neighborhood coming out to support, sponsors, teams, businesses, and individual stories being shared. It is not a race. It's just people riding together, talking, sharing stories, supporting each other.

Survivors (hundreds of them) come out and lead the first lap of the ride in a parade lap, honoring them. Riders fill the entire loop, three miles long, with the leaders catching the tail. Spencer's dad also comes out to the ride, which has raised over \$27 million for the Levine Cancer Center and the Levine Children's Hospital, impacting some 20,000 people.

Spencer closed his talk by sharing a little secret. There is a small black and white 24 Hours of Booty sticker on the stop sign at the intersection of Hopedale and Providence. It was put there during year one and is still there for the 22nd ride this weekend. Talk about a survivor!

In answer to questions, Spencer reiterated that he did not name the Loop, which was already a common name when he came to Charlotte. In year one, they raised \$6,000, which increased exponentially. They went from 100 riders the first year up to over 1,200 (subsequently capped at 1,200 for safety reasons) before the pandemic and expect about 1,000 this year. Even with reduced numbers, they consistently raise between \$1 and \$1.4 million each year from the ride, plus amounts raised from other smaller events during the year. The staff of the 24 Foundation consists of three full-time and one part-time employee. They also have about three hundred volunteers to help with the ride each year.

The first couple of years, the Myers Park neighborhood wasn't sure of exactly what was going on, and there was some friction, but over time the relationship has grown into something wonderful, and the support from the neighborhood is amazing. Watch parties and people cheering happen all the way around the loop, and it is hugely supportive for the riders. It is a wonderful feeling of community, and he chases that feeling every year.

The Foundation is a 501c(3) and accepts donations of all kinds, not just cash. To learn more, register to ride, donate, or volunteer, go to <https://www.24foundation.org/24-hours-of-booty/>.

Thanks to Spencer for sharing his amazing story and his very informative and entertaining speech.

*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/848576956>
The program introduction begins at 24:10 minutes.