

Riding to fight brain tumors

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By Richard C. Lewis, Globe Correspondent | May 18, 2006

The parents of a 4-year-old Needham boy who has a rare brain tumor have organized a cycling benefit Sunday to raise money to combat the disease.

Timothy James "TJ" Ragnoni has juvenile pilocytic astrocytoma, a brain tumor found in 1,000 children annually in the United States, according to the American Brain Tumor Association. Doctors were able to remove about 80 percent of TJ's golf ball-sized tumor when he was 1 1/2 years old, but the remainder is intertwined with his brain stem and cannot be removed without causing severe neurological damage, said his parents, John and Liz Ragnoni .

The boy has been undergoing an intensive regimen of chemotherapy, which his parents hope will keep the tumor from growing. An earlier regimen was unsuccessful in stifling the tumor.

"We're trying to get control over a situation where we have no control," John Ragnoni said.

The Ragnonis say specialists have been doing research in an attempt to find a cure for the disease, but what is lacking is money. They formed a cycling group, called Team TJ, which will ride for the first time in the Brain Tumor Society Ride for Research. The 10-, 25-, and 50-mile rides are being held at 8:30 a.m. Sunday at the Verizon office park in Waltham. Those interested in participating need to raise a minimum of \$250.

Team TJ hopes to raise \$500,000 from the ride. The Ragnonis say researchers have told them a few million dollars could be a great boost in finding new chemotherapy procedures that could shrink childhood brain tumors. The family is helping to fund a symposium of leading pediatric brain tumor researchers that will take place in Washington the day after the ride.

"There's a clear road map," said John Ragnoni, a 41-year-old senior vice president of marketing at Fidelity Investments in Boston. "It's not one of these things where doctors are scratching their heads saying, 'We don't know what to do with the money.'"

TJ's parents say their son has been stoic, and apart from his treatment, acts like any other boy, in this case, trying to keep up with his two older brothers, 9-year-old Jack and 7-year-old Michael.

"He won't be slowed down," Liz Ragnoni said. "He really does set the tone for us."

More information on the ride and the family's drive can be found at the Team TJ website, www.teamtj.org. ■

