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Spin City: Tales of Triumph, Adventure and Love on Two Wheels

By Liz Merfeld

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: “This is my time to myself to process the world and do my own thing.”

: Capital City State Trail and Monona Lake Loop

“Lungs and legs is what it takes to ride a bike,” says Langeston Hughes. That is *Langeston*, spelled with an e, who lives on Madison’s north side and prefers pedaling to poetry writing.

A lifelong athlete, he's always had the legs. Problem was, he was a lifelong smoker, too. It took a health scare last June to finally compel him to quit.

It was during last summer's forty-mile Dane County Honor Ride to benefit the Ride2Recovery veterans' charity when Hughes felt something wasn't right.

"At some point during the course, we were rehydrating at a stop," he remembers. "I got off my bike and I said to myself, 'Something's wrong. Something's different.'"

Without any pain, and unable to pinpoint the trouble, he made it to the finish line and called it a day.

Three days later, his right arm now numb, Hughes called in sick to work. Ending the call, he says, "Something told me to take my phone out of my right pocket and put it in my left pocket, so I did. Then at 6:15 a.m., I had a stroke. By myself. All alone in my house."

The moment was burned in his memory: "I felt my whole right side of my body shutting down. You could take a marker and draw a straight line down from the top of my head to my toes."

After thirty-six hours in the hospital, he headed home. The tests were conclusive, said his doctor. "It's only because I was biking and I was strong that I lived. He told me, 'You're healthy, but you're not healthy.'"

Almost four weeks later, his doc gave him the green light to ride one mile. "I rode three miles that day. That weekend I rode around Lake Monona," his favorite route. "At five weeks, I rode the same forty miles that damn near killed me."

He hasn't smoked since his stroke. "It's like a switch flipped. The desire isn't there. It's not part of me."

Today you'll find him breezily pedaling along the Capital City State Trail and adjoining city trails after work, including the new Cannonball Path bridge over the Beltline near Fish Hatchery Road.

If you're counting, Madison is home to forty-six miles of bike paths, 112 miles of bike lanes, seven miles of curb lanes, and 116 miles of bicycle routes. Hughes loves the fact that through these routes "you can connect from one side of town to another."

Having lived in cities as bike friendly as Fairbanks, Alaska, where twenty-three hours of daylight in summer make it a cyclist's paradise, and in places like Phoenix, Arizona, where the heat kept him indoors, he's enchanted by the diversity of Madison's biking community.

"You see people in every type of attire, from cotton sweats to the tightest stuff you could possibly put on your body. From fifty-dollar bikes to ten-thousand-dollar bicycles. Everyone that's out here has this kid awake in them. It's the most friendly, down-to-earth group of people."

While Hughes lives at the northernmost tip of Lake Mendota, he says, "I haven't done much biking in my neck of the woods." Instead, he carts his bike in his car downtown and cycles to work.

In the early evenings, he enjoys the solitude biking brings. "I don't have to keep pace with anyone. I don't have to talk to anyone. This is my time to myself to process the world and do my own thing."

: "It's a nice way to start the morning."

: Downtown and near west Madison city streets

When Madison B-Cycle opened in spring 2011, Torben Harrison was one of the first to take a shiny red three-speed for a spin. "I had always hoped Madison would get a bike-sharing program," he says.

At the time, he was commuting from Waunakee to his office on the Capitol Square, where parking spaces come at a premium. In comparison, an annual B-Cycle membership, with unlimited rides, was a bargain at only \$65.

A seasoned Madison Metro rider for that last leg of his trip downtown, Harrison found that swapping the bus for a bike on pleasant days was "a nice way to start the morning." Regardless of what the rest of the day had in store, he looked forward to his leisurely ten-minute, mile-and-a-half B-Cycle ride.

He was in good company. Last year, Madison B-Cycle members took a total of 81,662 trips (no doubt contributing to the 11,000 bicycle trips Madison has counted in just one day throughout downtown in peak season).

Harrison started taking lunchtime B-Cycle excursions, too, to run errands or just get his heart pumping. “On lunches it was nice to get down to the Union Terrace. That’s not a place I’d have time to walk to. But it was no problem on a bike.”

Best of all, there were no slacks-to-spandex bathroom changes involved. Thanks to B-Cycles’ protective chain guards and fenders, “I don’t have to change my clothes.”

A database administrator for the state, he now works near Hilldale Shopping Center, where he can park his car. But his lunchtime joyrides haven’t ended; there’s a B-station just down the street. In fact, this year, Madison B-Cycle added five new stations and fifty more bikes to its fleet for a total of forty-one stations and 375 bicycles.

: “[Cyclocross] is so much more of a community than any other style.”

: Military Ridge State Trail, Badger Prairie Park

Winding along the shore of Lake Wingra and close to the Arboretum, Vilas Park is a popular starting point for group bicycle rides. Five years ago, Brian Turany was about to ride off in one direction with his group while Meredith Peterson was heading in the opposite. After a few minutes of chitchat, they never would have guessed that one day biking would bring them together again.

Fast-forward two and a half years, when they showed up at the same indoor cycling class at Speed Cycling. “I was training during my off-season,” says Turany, who had fallen in love with cycling a decade earlier after it inspired him to lose weight, stop smoking and meet new friends.

Peterson was just getting ramped up for her peak season, the October-through-January sweet spot for cyclocross racing. In cyclocross races, cyclists ride through muddy grass and up and down hills, often carrying their bikes on their shoulders around obstacles.

It might sound precarious, but injuries are less severe than in criterium road races, where “you crash on pavement. You break bikes and bones,” Peterson says. You might fall racing cyclocross, but “you’re not going to take out twenty other people with you.”

Now friends, Turany came out to root for Peterson at the 2011 Cyclocross Nationals at Badger Prairie Park in Verona, held in January 2012. “He brought me a PBR tallboy,” she remembers.

More months ticked by. When Peterson posted to a listserv that she wanted to borrow a bike for an out-of-town visitor, it was Turany who offered his. She went to his house to get the bike, and when she returned it they had their first date. They rode to Middleton for a bite to eat.

Summer came and went, and it became clear to Turany then that he'd have to face his fears of cold weather and off-road bike handling if he wanted to spend more time with Peterson. That fall, he started racing cyclocross, and he hasn't looked back.

"It's a blast, it's so much more of a community than any other style," he says. "You swap wheels with each other, cheer for each other."

Just when most people are hanging up their bikes for the season, they're tuning up theirs. "The fall is a great time to ride," Peterson says. "The temperature is nice."

The now-engaged couple enjoys long endurance-building rides on the Military Ridge State Trail. When it's open for training, they like to hone specific cyclocross skills at Badger Prairie Park. In fair weather, they also commute together to work downtown from their home on the near west side of Madison.

: "It's just the easiest, cheapest, most convenient way to get to and from work. It costs nothing and I get a little exercise."

: Southwest Bike Path, to and from work

When he was mayor, Dave Cieslewicz made achieving "platinum" status (a notch up from our current "gold") with the League of American Bicyclists' Bicycle Friendly Communities program a priority.

This included budgeting for major infrastructure improvements and smaller amenities like bike boxes, the painted rectangles that move car traffic back from busy intersections to give bikes a safe zone in front of waiting traffic. Pedestrian and bicyclist hybrid beacons at intersections appeared as well, warning drivers to stop and give pedestrians and cyclists their own light for crossing.

Now, as executive director of the Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin, the country's largest statewide bicycle organization, "Citizen Dave" continues to help maintain Madison's reputation as one of the most bike-friendly cities in North America.

One of the Bike Federation's 2014 efforts involves getting the Vulnerable User Law passed. It would mandate tougher penalties for motorists who commit traffic violations that injure or kill vulnerable roadway users, including bicyclists. Offenders would also have to receive instruction on how to be safe around bikes and pedestrians.

"Biking is exploding all across the world," Cieslewicz says. "We need laws and infrastructure to meet the demand and to assure peaceful coexistence between bike riders and motorists."

Three years in the making, the Vulnerable User bill spent months stuck in the Senate Rules Committee before it was "essentially gutted." Says Cieslewicz, "What passed was one part of the bill that required a half hour of instruction in drivers education courses about how to be safe around bikes and pedestrians."

Cieslewicz says the Bike Federation will reintroduce the penalty enhancement for killing or injuring a cyclist or pedestrian next session.

Bottom line, bicyclists and drivers should work together, Cieslewicz says. "Most of us, like me, are both drivers and bike riders. As more of us spend more time on bikes we'll develop a culture where there's empathy on behalf of motorists because they'll understand what it's like to be on a bike."

: "I like the personal challenge that it brings."

: Dane County country roads

"I'm kind of an all-or-nothing person," Leah Stieber says of the way she took to road racing with almost no experience riding a bicycle outdoors.

It was in January 2010, in her gym's spinning class, that she first entertained the idea of a long-distance outdoor ride. There she had met a few veterans of the Wisconsin AIDS Ride, an annual four-day, three-hundred-mile charity bike ride through southern Wisconsin.

"A lot of people think, 'I can't do that.' And I think, 'Why not? Everyone has to start somewhere,'" Stieber says. So she signed up and "went to as many training rides as I could, and learned as much about biking as I could."

After the AIDS Ride, she wanted to try more. Next up was the Dairyland Dare in Dodgeville, followed by the Horribly Hilly Hundreds in Blue Mounds and Race the Lake in Fond du Lac: “I showed up by myself to every single one, and still had no idea what I was doing.”

Not everyone felt the same. That fall, a cycling mentor recommended her to a road racing team, and she joined, competing in her first race the following spring. “I raced every single weekend. Every race I would learn something new—never do that again, never be in the front at that certain time. At the end of the season, I was doing pretty well.”

She loved the community, watching and learning from the same people every week. One of her new contacts worked at Trek Bicycles, where Stieber began in the sales department in July 2011.

Because Stieber lives in Sun Prairie, much of her riding happens on country roads, often in the direction of Waterloo, Lodi or Devil’s Lake. “I feel like [the area] has a lot to offer for cycling,” she says.

Other days she’ll head into Madison to wind through the UW Arboretum, or go west toward Mount Horeb or Paoli.

The Madison area has “such a great country road system,” she says. For example, “We have shoulders. And for the most part, drivers respect bikers. I’ve never had a problem.”

A solo rider “ninety-five percent of the time,” she says riding in the country is therapeutic. “And always so pretty.”

: “I like speed.”

: Near east side Madison streets and bike trails

Madison’s DreamBikes store, on the West Beltline Highway near Seminole, is part of a nonprofit that refurbishes donated bikes and sells them at a discounted price, providing hands-on, paid job training to teens.

Seven years ago, JaCorian Rice was one of these teens. Having graduated high school the year before, Rice was working at WalMart when the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County suggested he get some friends together and apply for a job at DreamBikes.

A year later, Rice's friends eventually left, but he was promoted to service manager. Viewing the position as more of a career than a job, he says, "It never got boring. I actually liked coming to work. That was different. I never had a job that I liked coming to."

Because DreamBikes serves low- to moderate-income neighborhoods by design, working there is personally rewarding for Rice. "You change people's lives. People wouldn't normally be able to afford these bikes."

Sometimes parts get donated rather than whole, usable bikes. Rice enjoys using the parts to custom-build bikes for customers, letting them choose everything down to the color of the handlebar tape. "We get to mix and match. I like doing it a lot. It makes me feel good."

Just this year DreamBikes flew him out on a scholarship to the United Bike Institute in Ashland, Oregon, where he earned certifications and learned how for-profit bike shops operate.

He credits his career for introducing him to road biking as a sport. He rides for fun and also has participated in the annual Bike for Boys & Girls Club ride and the Trek 100 Ride for Hope, supporting pediatric cancer research.

While he'll sometimes convince friends to ride with him, Rice usually rides alone. "Most of them don't have bikes, so they'll borrow a bike and we'll go for a ride. We shoot out for two-and-a-half hours and come back. They like it, until they look at bike prices."

But, he points out, you don't have to buy a Trek Madone 5.5 like he has. "My bike costs more than my car."

Around town, he likes to ride on the near east side. "I live on the south side, so when I ride I go east toward Winnebago Street. It's such a bike-friendly city, especially in summer."

"But the best ride I've had is out toward Paoli," he says, with its seemingly endless stretch of road ahead. "I like speed. I like to go fast."

Liz Merfeld is a Madison-based writer.

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