

Lets Go Ride Bikes: Journaling a Cross-Country Experience

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“Where it all Started”

I sat intrigued with my little, leather pledge book opened to a brother's information page as he talked about what he had just finished doing with his last summer. It just so happened that this was also his interesting fact. The moment I wrote it down, an idea had been planted inside my head that I would entertain for the next year. Slowly it grew, being cultivated by the memories and discussions I had had with other brothers that had also participated in the program. Listening to Brady Lawrence and Adam Blaser reminisce about Bike & Build, made me realize that this was an adventure I had to be apart of.

I began researching the organization through their online website. I pestered the guys who had done the trip, asking them questions about how to raise the money, if I would be accepted, could I really handle the length of the rides, would I be in shape, did they think I would like it. I wrote my essays and finished the application when I noticed that I also had the opportunity to apply as a leader for the exact same program. I read the responsibilities for both the leaders and riders. Why not at least try and apply for the leader position...? If I am not accepted, I still have the chance of being a rider. I might as well throw my hat in the ring. I quickly contacted my brother, who recently graduated high school, to see what he thought. He was instantly on board with the idea and also wanted to be apart of this cross-country experience despite having to miss school for the week or two leading up to his exams and graduation. We were both accepted. My brother as a rider, me as a leader, riding the same route.

“The Journey Begins”

Several months of hard work and anticipation hung over our heads as we desperately lead fundraisers, crafted our letter campaign, made numerous calls asking for donations, and began training for the start of the trip. It was painful watching the donations trickle in at such a slow rate wondering when and if I would reach my \$4,500 goal.

At first, I was embarrassed to ask for money or to go out of my way to solicit donations. But, the more I put myself out there, the more excited and proud I became. I sent over 100 letters and emails to friends, family, employers, and companies, I set up a stationary bike on Franklin Street to talk to passersby about the program, I walked up and down Franklin Street talking to multiple bars and restaurants about sponsoring benefit nights, which I successfully managed to arrange. Some of them even included me standing in the restaurant wearing a spandex bike suit asking for customer's receipts.

The fundraising aspect was only one of the requirements necessary to participate on the ride. Before too long, the leadership responsibilities kicked in, adding a new challenge to my summer preparations. There are 72 separate days from Nags Head, NC to San Diego, CA that the four leaders need to ensure are planned. The trip is divided into four sections, one for each leader. From there, we each contacted several community centers in the various designated areas of the route to find potential overnight hosts for our group. This required numerous phone

calls and email follow-ups to each location. Once the host had been determined, a similar procedure followed in an attempt to arrange showers, meals, and laundry services for each stop throughout the summer. Months of planning went into this trip to coordinate with all the hosts, between our leadership team, and our riders.

With the trip planed, the money fundraised, and the sweat equity underway, what else is left but to just ride bikes, right? This was a horrible understatement. The responsibility as a leader drastically amplified on the road and our leadership team, at the time, did not understand that the real exhaustion and difficulty was soon to come.

“Where Rubber Meets Road”

The leaders arrive at orientation on the May 12 to begin preparations for the riders to come. We all met with the director and went through countless hours of DOs and DONTs, preparing for different scenarios, planning different activities and ride days, finalizing hosts and routes that we would take, coordinating meals, going through physical forms and personal records, inventorying the equipment, asking for donations to support our group, and formulating plans for how we wanted to address certain incidents, accidents, and team decisions. All this information had to be sorted through prior to meeting the riders.

It’s May 15. The riders arrive today. There is a nervous tension circulating amongst our leadership team as we buzz around setting up last minute stations to organize people when they arrive. We know so little about these people that we will be living with the remainder of the summer; the thought is chilling. And finally, people start arriving. A small group forms, then a mass, then a crowd. Everyone and their parents are here. Bags are being unloaded, bikes being assembled and unpacked, check in is taking place and awkward tension begins to replace the nervousness that was existing earlier that morning.

As leaders, we don’t know what they are expecting from us, or the orientation in general, and the riders are equally clueless. We endure several hours of procedural information, slides, and presentations with some icebreakers and skits mixed in. Practice packing up, loading the trailer, and cleaning the host as if it was a real ride day and then run through some cycling obstacle courses with the riders to gage their riding abilities. Once all the formal information and evaluations are finished, we go for a twenty-mile practice ride with everyone to the island’s lighthouse and back. This marked our first ride together as a group and the cornerstone to build from for the rest of the trip.

The Experience

Traveling the country on a bike is like drifting through an entirely new world. The experience simply cannot be retold accurately enough to do complete justice to the beauty of the countryside, the lessons that were learned, or the people that were met. The difference between riding a bike from place to place as a means of transportation, versus other, faster, more modern forms (such as planes, trains, or automobiles) is that on a bike you do not simply watch as landmarks fly past, or see

something interesting for a split second and then zoom away resuming normal conversation as if nothing had happened. On a bike, you are in the heart of it all. The sites can be seen from a 360-degree perspective for extended periods of time, fascinating encounters with curious passersby are endless, and there is this sense of childish spontaneity that can overcome a person, almost instantly capture their imagination and causing them to drift away from the monotony of the asphalt; this is the world I have been living in.

"The Face of Bike & Build"

Work is fun if you love what you are doing. I absolutely loved every single second of what I was doing. Each morning I woke up, I was proud to put on my Bike & Build shirt. Whether it was to drive or ride that day, I was excited to be apart of something so groundbreaking and incredible that I couldn't hold my head any higher.

"The USA is a Melting Pot"

Our journeys took our group through many diverse areas. We largely traveled on back roads, avoiding major highways and interstates. These winding detours often lead us through small towns. Most notably in many of these areas was the drastic affect of the changing economy. An entire town may have been established on one type of trade or industry, but over time as the business relocates or goes bankrupt and ceases to exist, the towns begin to die; they lose their spirit.

On our third ride day we rode into Belhaven, NC. The entire town was established near a small port or inlet that brought in a large amount of trade to the area as well as bolstered the seafood industry. When the demand for this port diminished and other larger ports developed, many people moved away leaving their homes, neighborhoods, and local businesses to dry up. It was depressing walking the main street that the entire town is built on, seeing more out of business shops than functioning ones. They were desolate with no apparent hope for revival by other shop owners willing to move in and fill the space.

This was apparent not just in this town, but many communities in Kansas as well. Midway through one of our rides, another rider and I turned down a gravel road to take a break and sit in the shade. As we looked around the property we noticed an abandoned house that was dilapidated and beginning to collapse on itself. The house was filled with random out of date appliances and miscellaneous objects as well as beer bottles and trash. The property that the house rested on was expansive and stretched for miles, but there were no crops growing on it anywhere, no cattle, sheep, horses, nor any sign of life in general.

Talking to a local storeowner in the next town later that day, we were informed that most of the land we had ridden through is owned by various families that made a living as ranchers. The children of these families would do most of the labor and help maintain the land, but as they grew up and pursued other occupations, careers, and higher education, they would move away from the town to create a new life for themselves rarely returning to the ranches. There would be no

one to run the ranch and the parents would be too old to maintain it themselves or didn't have the money to sustain the upkeep, and therefore gave it to their children who would have little use for it. Thus, the land and any estates on it slowly begin to fade away.

These types of towns were particularly inspiring and touching to witness. For people that have so little, they were so willing and excited to support our route as we passed through their area. An excellent example is Salida, CO. This small mountain town has a young, up-and-coming Habitat for Humanity program. We worked side by side with the future homeowners and also heard numerous personal stories from existing homeowners. Having the opportunity to speak with these people about their lives and experience with Habitat for Humanity, while manually laboring next to them on a project showed me how large of an impact my efforts could have. These builds were some of the most rewarding because it made the affordable housing crisis so much more personal.

"How did we form such a tight knit community?"

One of the realizations that I had on the trip that continued to shock me was the idea that 27 strangers can be so randomly selected and thrown together for an entire summer and form such cohesive bonds. After the first two weeks of our trip, alumni were commenting on how close everyone was on the route. We "had progressed more in 2 weeks than some trips do in 4-5 weeks" one of the alumni mentioned to our leadership team. Whether that was because of similar interests in the affordable housing cause, the idea that each person wanted to have a unique impact on the trip, or if people were learning from the habits and personalities of others on the trip. If people were so genuine with such similar backgrounds that everyone could relate so easily or if the pure submersion in a setting that relies on teamwork tied the knot between each person.

I would be lying if I said cliques and best friend groups did not form, but I can honestly say each person on the route could spend an afternoon with another rider on the route and never have a dull or awkward moment. Whenever someone had a flat tire or was stopped on the side of the road at any portion during a ride, I noticed that every group of riders that would pass the stopped rider would check on them to see if they were ok, needed any supplies or help. Everyone was more than willing to offer up their own resources, time and energy to assist in any possible way so that no teammate was left behind to struggle or not enjoy their own experience. This was so shocking because of how accepting, outgoing, and supportive our microcosm of society could be. Despite sexuality, gender, beliefs, or personal issues, each rider would extend a hand to a fellow rider in need. This simple gesture to tell each other "hey I'm here for you" fostered a sense of trust and stability so that each rider could count on their peers and would never feel alone on the road.

The idea of reaching out to others regardless of who they are, what their background is, or what their personal beliefs are really exemplifies the type of people that this program and experience attracts. Its remarkable that so many individuals can identify so closely. A group of young people decided to dedicate the entirety of their summer to raising an incredible amount of money to donate to

people they had never even met. Sacrificing whole days to a habitat build in the scorching heat, day in and day out, just to do it again a few days later. And, ride days were equally as humbling. Having the entire day to think and reflect on life, friendship, relationships, personal interests or desires, lifelong experiences, grief, sorrow, happiness, excitement, thrill, chaos, complaints. These days were physically demanding, but only marginally.

The real challenge was to convince yourself that biking was your job, your responsibility. Each person had the role of waking up, getting ready, and biking an extended work shift until the sun began to set when everyone could wash up, eat dinner, and retire for the night. Rather than working a job all summer, these young leaders were advocating. Each day, regardless of the weather, everyone was on the saddle, one-after- another, without hesitation, to do their part for the cause. We ride to advocate for a cause.

I met people from varying backgrounds, religious beliefs, sexuality, gender, criminal records, and education, but each person brought a new perspective to the scene that was unique. This collective skill set allowed our group to be so coherent and cohesive. Rock climbers, Eagle Scouts, river guides, AmeriCorps, biology majors and physicists, prospective doctors and physical therapists, social workers, speech pathologists and Peace Corps veterans, small business entrepreneurs or creators of nonprofit organizations, these are the people I learned so much from, each with their own skill or lesson to teach. These are the people I am proud to say that I biked across the country with.

"Lets Be Friends"

One defining moment for me was noticing the adhesive really solidify between our friendships at our first build site in Chapel Hill, NC. There is something about manual labor and the physical aspect of providing a service to someone that unites people in a way that is unexplainable. Its as if the power of the experience and necessity of those around you can bind a group of strangers together on the job site for the time being, but leave behind lasting ties and shared memories when the work is finished.

For me, I felt a sensation of purity, an earnest desire to help without recompense, to sacrifice myself in support of a family, and the people around me immediately recognized this. The feeling was mutual and collectively shared among our group; it actively inspired and motivated us to work that much harder. At our first job site, we were asked to shingle one of the Habitat houses in Orange County. Our group consisted of about 15 Bike & Builders. We had to carry the shingles up to the roof, nail down tarpaper, place and set the sheets of shingles, measure to ensure they were straight, and hammer them down.

Throughout the day, as the sun and heat beat down on us, we developed a method of working together to be as efficient as possible. The group of three that I was working with assigned two people to lay down the shingle sheet and align it with the other shingles, and the third person nailed it down. This system only worked well because we all communicated with each other throughout the process,

while keeping a quick but consistent pace. This system effectively allowed us to maximize the efforts of the volunteers that were allowed on the roof.

Arriving at the site earlier that day, the Build Site Supervisor told us to get as far as we could on the roof that day and that we would not finish shingling the whole thing. Because of how well we worked together, our group shingled the entire roof during that build and we were the first group of inexperienced volunteers to accomplish such a feat. This achievement fostered a relationship that persisted throughout the remainder of the trip. Because, at that moment, I felt as if I could understand these people better than anyone.

“Combating Confrontation”

As a member of such a large group that grows closer and increasingly personal with one another, each person becomes more and more held accountable when they say or do something that is not recognized by the others. This was especially true as a leader. All the eyes were constantly on our leadership team. When one of us made a decision, the other leaders would back that person up. We maintained the credibility and respect of our riders by making decisions as a team of four, rather than as four individuals.

However, there were a few instances when riders lost sight of the importance of the leaders. All of us, riders and leaders, were new to Bike & Build, but the leaders were the most knowledgeable about the road between hosts, host locations, potential challenges or dangers along the way, or even good spots to stop to break. As a leadership team we always maintained an open and informative relationship with our riders. For example, we allowed them to view the backend system if they were interested in the ride for the next day, encouraged their input or ideas on how to benefit the group, relied on them to keep the leaders informed about chore groups, and involved them in many decisions that would impact the everyone. Often times, however, the leaders did not consult the group on decisions that would create tension, arguments, or strife amongst the group. With so many opinions and suggestions about topics such as wake up times, what food we would eat, or when dinner and showers should take place.

The difficult part came when riders began to try to make their own decisions in the best interest of a few people, rather than considering the majority of the group. This slowly grew into a larger and larger issue as several riders began to question many of our leadership decisions. Control of the group was slowly being pulled away from the leaders. At this point in the trip, there was a fine line that we were walking. If we are too harsh or take the wrong approach to refocus our group on who the decision makers are we could lose the respect and credibility we had worked so hard to establish.

The solution we arrived at was to tighten up on some of the rules we had not been enforcing as actively as others. This was a large area of weakness that the riders were exploiting. They often would mention that the group was uncertain which rules were going to be harshly and strictly enforced or punished, and which ones were not. We quickly reminded everyone that safety was the primary concern and that was where most of our energy was focused. A few people paid the price and

broke some of these safety rules that were outlined ahead of time and were punished as a result.

The worst punishment we could warrant on any one person along our trip was to van them for the day. Meaning, they could not ride that section of the route between the two hosts and they essentially had to sit in a car, supporting the rest of the team throughout the duration of the day. This also meant that they were not actually biking across the country and would miss out on any fun or exciting activities that may be taking place that day.

One example of confrontation that we had to endure as a leadership team was the issue of hitchhiking. This is a dangerous activity because, despite the obvious of getting in a car with a stranger and being at the whim of their decisions, the leaders would have no idea how to keep track of anyone on the road, where each rider was, and if people were safe or not. We were informed of two guys on our route hitchhiking during a ride in Kansas. They argued that it was the safest and best decision, taking into consideration the weather and their current condition on the road. They contacted the leader driving that day and after examining a few possible options, they decided to get a ride from a passerby without the consent of the leaders.

We could not let this event go unpunished and set a precedent for the other riders that we thought hitchhiking was acceptable. The confrontation that followed was a difficult for me because we vanned the two guys for the day, but I could understand their reason for hitchhiking. Although I wanted to agree with them that the punishment was too harsh, I had to stand by our decision as a leadership team. We decided to be strong and back one another up and had I broken this decision, we would have lost credibility, broken trust, and appeared weak as a team. This was a hard lesson to get through, but important nonetheless. I need to respect my fellow co-leaders and stand with them regardless of whether we take heat and criticism from others because of our decision. At the end of the day, we would be united and strong, making decisions that look out for the welfare of the group, rather than satisfy the interests of a few.

“This Trip is not Catered to you”

Several instances during our trip, the attitude of a lot of our riders began to shift away from the affordable housing cause and what our purpose was on the road. They seemed to have lost track of the real reason we were all on the trip in the first place. What started as a trip of service to raise money and awareness, advocating for affordable housing, was drifting toward a trip based on accomplishing a selfish goal, a summer vacation, losing weight, or a way to escape the stress and pressure of personal lives. The trip may be those things for many people, but the underlying reason and focus for our time together is to develop leaders, while also supporting a cause that directly affects the United States population.

As a leadership team, we had to refocus our group to avoid these selfish tendencies and get back on track to recognize the real meaning of why we are all on the road in the first place. We called for a mandatory meeting and sat our group

down to discuss our disappointment with some of their attitudes and actions. Like a virus, this entitled mentality was beginning to spread and infect the outlook of others among our group; not everyone had lost sight of the motives of the trip, but everyone had experienced these thoughts.

Examples that we expressed as being inappropriate were complaints about cold water in showers, protests of being too tired to interact with our host who went to great lengths to ensure our stay in their town was comfortable, scoffing or voicing negativity at the quality of food that was being provided to us (for free), whining about leadership decisions that didn't support them, such as wake up times or lack of free time, or avoiding chore duties, such as washing everyone's clothes or cleaning dishes for our meals. All this strife and tension was not conducive for our group dynamic and did not support the cohesiveness that our route previously had. It is understandable that people would have selfish desires and make decisions in their best interest, such as not properly rationing limited food, jumping to the front of the line for a warm shower, leaving when their own chores were finished without helping complete other chores, or not actively participating in group activities. But as a team and a family, it is also important to keep in mind the people around you.

Because each person felt cut off from the luxuries that they are accustomed to in their own personal lives, these actions and decisions may have been done unintentionally or unknowingly. But, in order for each person to contest and satisfy their own feelings of discomfort from being so far from home, there was less thought given to the feelings of the other people on the route. For a majority of the riders, this was an important lesson that they took to heart, drastically improving their experience for the remainder of the trip.

"Want to Play a Game"

A few weeks pass and our group is operating like a well-oiled machine. Spirits are high and the trip is running smoothly. Before too long, the ride days begin to blend together, looking and feeling the same. The constant traveling, unpacking, repacking, cleaning, it all started to become very monotonous. Each person found their own way to distract themselves during the ride to keep their mind off the long duration of some of the rides.

The small games or distractions were very helpful, if not essential to ensure that each person remained engaged in what was going on around them. This was not only the individual's responsibility to acknowledge when they are "zoning out," but also the responsibility of that person's riding group for that day. The group I rode with would typically play word games to guess what another person was thinking, count cows by calling out "my cow" to claim a pasture of cattle, or creating verbal stories by taking turns saying a few sentences at a time to add onto an ongoing narrative, continuing where the previous person had left off. Unfortunately, these small tricks or mind games could only last so long.

One section of the trip consisted of a span of nine days in a row where we rode everyday without a rest day or even a build day to break up the rides. The games drastically lost their affect during this stretch becoming lackluster and losing their appeal. This section of the route happened to be in the midst of Kansas, our

collective least favorite state. One specific day in this spell of ride days, the leaders planned a fun gathering for all the riders in order to break up some of the repetition that was occurring. We hosted an arm wrestling match.

The guys all weighed in, had nicknames, a weight class with four contenders in their bracket, and were announced as they stepped up to do their match. The girls would cheer on the guys during our matches and when it came time for the girls' matches, we would cheer them on. Luckily, we were camping that night and the silent hours of the campsite were not enforced until after dark. The screams and supportive chanting resounded throughout the camp, causing curious tenants from other sites to meander over and observe where all the noise was coming from. Our group had so much fun during the arm-wrestling matches, pure entertainment, free of technology, and it easily became one of the fondest memories of many of the people in our group.

"It's Always Gonna be an Uphill Battle"

One of the worst days I ever had driving the van took place when we left Waynesville, NC on our way to Gatlinburg, TN via the Blue Ridge Parkway and through the Great Smoky Mountains. I drove to the lunch spot, unloaded the coolers, waited for everyone to eat and resume riding, and then I drove the remainder of the distance to the host site. I picked up an injured rider on the way and after arriving and checking in with the host, I received a call that a rider was not feeling well and had to stop midway on one of the climbs. She was not in any serious condition, only sick, but sweep was also stopped and sitting there with her. I finished unloading the trailer when the first group of riders arrived. One of the girls in the group did not look healthy. She was "bonking", a term used to describe when someone is completely exhausted and cannot exert anymore energy to the point where they feel depleted, dizzy, or even delirious.

I was worried about her well-being, knowing that we had limited food supply at this point and were too far away from town for them to ride and get food for her, while at the same time being distracted by the other riders still stuck on the mountain without a working cell phone. Two other riders at the host site helped me get the exhausted person water and snacks as well as some dry clothes, ice, and a cool place to relax. Then I frantically figured out a plan for dinner, purchased gas to make the trip back to pick people up, and raced around to make sure everyone would safely arrive where they needed to be.

I was overly tense and stressed out as I drove the 90 mile round trip to pick up all the riders that were still on the road, competing against the rapidly approaching darkness. I did not feel 20 this day, nor did I feel like a college kid having a summer experience of a lifetime. I felt like a nervous wreck that had lost sight of the beauty of the entire day in the Blue Ridge Parkway and Great Smoky Mountains because I was too distracted by events that were not in my control.

“This was my Realization”

It’s funny giving someone advice that you, yourself, would not normally listen to. I tried to coach my co-leader through a tough drive day that involved making a joint leadership decision, which he was not comfortable with. I realized something in that moment that influenced me throughout the remainder of the summer and even now that I am back in school and the real world.

Stress, anxiety, fear, concern, are all sentiments that each person creates in their own head in reaction to various circumstances. The occurrences have already happened and regardless of the current situation, an individual does have the ability to control how they feel and react to what is taking place. It is human nature to have these emotions and feelings, but letting them overwhelm and control the mind is a loss of power that can impede the function and continuity of life. There is no reason why the same decision cannot be made using a calm, collected mindset as with a frantic, chaotic mentality. My drive days began to go much more smoothly after this recognition.

“Eye of the Tiger, Thrill of the Fight”

By far my favorite ride days were riding through Colorado and overcoming the majestic Rocky Mountains, which I now have a newfound respect for. Trudging through the vast expanse of the Midwest, everyone was growing increasingly tired and irritated. Reading a cue sheet and realizing that there are only 2 turns for an 80 mile ride stretching on infinitely only to disappear behind the horizon. The land was flat, characterized only by the various shades of dirt or grass that blanketed the landscape. The wind taunting each of us relentlessly as we continued to slowly progress forward toward our West coast goal. At last, we see the Colorado border. Our spirits instantaneously find a new sense of vigor. We have reached a tremendous milestone, eagerly craving our next one, traversing the Rockies.

Colorado is not a state solely created of mountains though. For almost a week, we ventured through hot, desolate, uniform desert in pursuit of the elegant reward that could vaguely be distinguished in the sky just ahead of us. Several intense rides over gravel roads, long stretches of country, back roads, heat exhaustion, dehydration, sunburn, low blood sugar, and saddle sores, brought us to the base of the Rocky Mountains. We stared up at the sleeping giants in awe, thankful for their beauty, but also anxiously anticipating the steepest, longest, most difficult consecutive climbs of the trip.

One of the highlights of all the ride days for the entire trip carried us from Buena Vista, Colorado to Gunnison, Colorado over the Western Continental Divide. Monarch pass presented a challenging 12,000 ft. climb to the ascent. The 3 guys in my group who typically ride together prepared for the day as any athlete approaches a big game. We talked during the ride to the base of the mountain, but only minimally; our entire focus was concentrated on reaching the top. We began the climb. Beauty encompasses us in every direction I turn. Vast canyons swallow your attention, lush trees decorate the mountainsides, and ridges paint the land from horizon to horizon, only to fade into outlines in the sky. We put our heads

downs to watch the road crawl past our tires as we progress up the mountainside. The air begins to get thinner. Fatigue is setting in. Legs are getting heavy and weak. The two guys leading slowly pull away. I drop off and slow my cadence, until I'm riding alone now too. Looking ahead I see the road cling to the mountain miles ahead of me indicating the remaining stretch that waits ahead. I look up again moments later, time has drifted by, but at what speed, the road is slowly disappearing ahead of me as more and more sky unfolds. I read "Monarch Peak" from a sign teetering over the asphalt and I realize, at last I made it! Just passed the sign are the other riders cheering me on and blasting music inviting me to join the celebration. I feel tears slowly begin to swell as my eyes grow heavy and swollen with emotion. When I signed up for the trip, I most looked forward to climbing the Rockies. This challenge excited me the most and we accomplished it. This goal was intangible months earlier. And now, I am standing on top of the Western Continental Divide gazing over what seems like the entire country and admiring the serenity of the view; peaks populated the terrain in all directions.

"SUS or us"

After leaving some of my favorite places of the route, we proceed to Arizona. As we approach one of our overnight stops, rumors begin to circulate when the riders discovered that our route would be overlapping with another Bike & Build route. The rumors mentioned that two Bike & Build groups could not successfully share the same host without causing conflict between the routes. The last time two routes happened to share the same host, arguments and complaints erupted between the riders from the different trips; so there was some truth or history behind the rumors. Our group inevitably proved these rumors to fall on deaf ears. The North Carolina to San Diego route (NC2SD) crossed paths with Southern United States (SUS) in Kayenta, Arizona on June 22. Our leader had coordinated with a host contact in this town to arrange the NC2SD overnight there, however, the SUS trip leader was not fortunate enough to set up an overnight with another community center in the small town. Both leadership teams decided that the best solution was to simply share the same host for that night.

Obviously all the leaders and riders new the rumors, so anxiety and nervousness began to build as both groups had no idea what to expect. The tension exists as a result of their leaders enforcing certain policies that our leaders may not necessarily enforce or vice versa. Similarly, if either of the routes follows through with certain punishments or offers different privileges to the riders that the other route may not. This situation causes questions to arise that stratify the routes based on one side feeling gipped out of a certain experience or alternatively feeling pretentious for being better than the other riders.

In reality, the SUS riders were just as cool and weird as we were. The church consisted of one moderate sized meeting room, 2 bathrooms, 1 kitchen, and 2 small classrooms, the stage was set for problems to ensue; but the opposite occurred. Everyone meshed well, curiosity flourished, stories were told, and we had a great time examining the parallel experiences that we all shared throughout the course of our trips. The next morning we even showed their group our "shake down" and

“break down” that we do before each ride day, which then led to an inter-group “dance off” as an alternative warm up to start the day.

From our overnight together, both trips learned to appreciate the sense of community that was stimulated amongst the two groups despite differences. We all expected to dislike this other group of people whom we hadn’t even met and create excuses or reasons for why we thought we would not get along, but at the end of our time shared together during that one overnight, everyone would agree that we could have ridden the entire summer together as one, combined, and cohesive group.

“Guess What... We just Biked Across the Country”

It has been 70 days since our first encounter in the outer banks of Nags Head, NC. At last, the West coast. The warm sun, squawking seagulls, the sticky humidity, and the musty, salt taste that lingers around our unshaven mouths are welcomed by glowing faces and lifted spirits. We rode into La Jolla, CA one of the wealthiest, luxurious areas in the country, not having a care in the world, except to see the breaking waves of the Pacific Ocean and plunging into the surf. Our 27-person group rode through the narrow streets, passing small shops and restaurants, glamorous cars, and fancy clothing, shouting from joy and excitement, completely oblivious to everything else. We overtook the entire road, stopped traffic, and blared the National Anthem as loud as our lungs could manage in uncontrolled ecstasy. We rushed down to the water, set our bikes down, clasped hands, and sprinted into the refreshing seawater. Pictures followed, hugs and kisses, champagne showered as we uncorked our bottles, and cigars were lit, perched between each persons lips. We had arrived at our final destination together.

“Tell me about your Summer”

The multiple facets of what Bike & Build is will never fully do justice to the immensity that this experience has had on my life. I biked across the country to raise money and awareness for affordable housing and this became my identity this summer. I experienced a brief taste of homelessness, moving from place to place each day, surviving based on my interaction with others whom I had never met, and living solely out of a duffle bag. I have learned so many powerful lessons, seen the most amazing sights, interacted with some of the most fascinating people, struggled through adversity, witnessed the purest forms of humanity, laughed harder than ever, and had the most memorable adventures with some of the greatest individuals that I have grown to love. The best part was being able to share this incredible experience with so many people along the road and in the lodge, but most importantly, with my little brother. Bike & Build has become a part of my life, engrained in my identity, and will be a memory I will always reflect on.

Challenges of the trip:

- Coordinating plans with a large group
- Maintaining power, authority, and credibility as a leader due to my young age
- Tension, disagreements or poor attitudes as a leadership team bringing down the spirit and energy of the rest of the group
- Maintaining the best interest of the group and putting selfish person desires aside

Lessons I learned and hope to bring back to the lodge:

Communication: The ability to effectively and efficiently convey information to my leadership team, riders on the road, bike & build administrators, riders' parents, host contacts, and our cycling group at the host sites.

Counseling: The skill I developed to listen and understand the feelings of the riders and my co-leaders. This experience was very demanding, not just physically, but mentally as well. It's not easy to live with the same 26 individuals, in an extreme social setting and uncomfortable living conditions for 72 straight days. I was always willing to listen and talk to anyone that had personal issues, strife with other riders, family issues, disappointment with the rides or leadership decisions, and I sincerely believe that I had a positive impact on multiple individuals throughout this experience.

Mediation: Finding a way to take my personal opinion and views out of a confrontation or argument in order to settle disagreements.

Organization: Managing my time as well as planning a schedule to accommodate to the desires of the majority of people without inconveniencing others.

Honesty: The integrity required to manage donations and interact with strangers along the road to advocate for our cause and gain support.

Confidence: A newfound sense of personal pride in who I am as well as having the courage to speak what's on my mind and stand for what I believe in. I am much more outgoing, comfortable reaching out to people, and increasingly willing to step outside of my comfort zone.

Gratefulness: The learned mentality to appreciate the little things. I was humbled so many times by such wonderful people who were so willing to help support our cause. People taking the time out of their busy lives and full schedules to bend over backwards to ensure we were comfortable. The little things that could go so far, such as a warm shower, a shelter over our heads, cold drinking water, clean clothes, or even shade from a tree on a hot day. These luxuries are taken for granted. It took a summer of homelessness and living from a duffle bag to understand this.

Respect: The practice of understanding and experiencing other perspectives that allowed for such a random group of 27 individuals to come together as a family and successfully bike across the entire country, while raising money, and creating awareness by advocating for the affordable housing cause.

Expenses:

| | |
|---------------------------|------------|
| Food/Snacks: | \$323.79 |
| Activities during trip: | \$149.65 |
| On the Road Supplies: | \$49.58 |
| Airfare: | \$300 |
| Gear for Bike: | \$985.13 |
| Donation to Bike & Build: | \$100 |
| | |
| Total Expenditure: | \$1,908.15 |