



# Bicycling

*Bikes for Inner City Kids*

## The Ride of Their Lives

**What do you do with 10 inner-city kids whose lives are so wrecked by shootings, poverty and methamphetamines that they got tossed out of every school that tried to help them? You take them out to the middle of nowhere and put them on bikes.**

By Robin Chotzinoff

### North Dakota, Spring

An old school bus, the kind that coughs and threatens not to start, arrives at a remote campground. Ten kids in their late teens—three boys and seven girls—emerge, wearing oversize hoodies, baggy pants and expensive sneakers. To them, this place is just like the empty expanses they gazed at during the seven-hour drive that brought them here: just a lot of dirt and sky. Worse, there's no cell-phone reception.

Five chaperones follow them out of the bus. Teacher Jeff Storck wastes no time setting up the campsite, which sits on the banks of the Missouri River in an area that was once visited by Lewis and Clark. Nearby, ride leader Rick McFerrin opens his dinged-up van to reveal an interlocked snag of old, mud-caked bikes. The teenagers gather slowly for a quick lesson in seat adjustment, helmet fitting and water-bottle carrying. There is not now, nor will there ever be, a spandex garment in sight. Learning that there will now be a short practice ride infuriates the students because, well, what about dinner?

August, Yengke and Siem, the only boys, decide to get it over with, attacking a quarter-mile hill leading to a United States cavalry post once occupied by General Custer and his troops. In the rear, a slow posse of overweight, resigned girls sets off, eventually walking their bikes. Best friends Laurie and Loralena, both small, wiry chain-smokers, ride in the middle. Adults monitor the group like two-wheeled cow dogs, circling back to encourage the teens, most of whom have never exercised regularly. The boys arrive so winded they have to bend over, spit and recover with cigarettes. Laurie and Loralena don't plan to recover at all; both suffer from asthma, though often its onset seems suspiciously timed.

As the group watches the sunset from the roof of the cavalry lookout, Rick latches onto a teaching moment. "Why are we here?" he asks. "What do we hope to get out of the trip? Any misgivings?"

Heavy silence.

"Anyone know the story of General Custer?" Jeff asks.

"He was a great American general!" Yengke yells. Six months clean from a meth habit—there's a tenuous connection between that and the rough homemade tattoos that cover his arms—he's the only kid in the group who isn't afraid to show a little enthusiasm, and Jeff doesn't embarrass him by bringing up Little Big Horn. With a class full of students who struggle to meet eighth-grade reading standards and whose idea of attendance is to stop by a classroom now and then, he tends to keep lessons simple.

The ride back to the camp is downhill, requiring no fitness.

"You're out of control, August," Rick says calmly. "You're skidding, August! Are you hearing me?"

"Say what? This helmet is overheating my head! It's messing with my braids!"

Back at camp, August touches up his cornrows, picks at his dinner and wishes he were back in St. Paul to keep an eye on his girlfriend, who not only cheats, but also seems to inspire people to shoot at each other.

"I'm only here because I need the credits," Gina says, commiserating. "I hate this shit. I'm, you know, a bad kid."

It's a fact more than a judgment—kids usually end up at Project Lead after having been kicked out of every other public school in St. Paul, Minnesota. Jeff's current class contains felons, veterans of drive-by shootings, teen moms and one person who will have to find pay phones for daily check-ins with a probation officer, but also students like Gina, who just don't seem to have much drive to go to school. "A lot of my students are super seniors, which means one or two years behind," Jeff says.

"Then there's a bobblehead senior, which is three years behind—they made up these names themselves—and at 21, you're out. Every year, we get an influx of African-American young men who get dumped here because the other schools are afraid of their scores. We're dealing with kids no one wants."

But Jeff has been drawn to this sort of kid ever since he can remember, even while growing up in rural Iowa, and that's who he's worked with for the past 10 years. Funding keeps disappearing and his staff has been cut from four to two. Even in less frugal times, promising students drop out of school overnight, violence erupts and school administrators seem poised to block any creative approach.

For now, though, Jeff is still able to indulge his love of hiking, running and cycling, which he hopes to communicate to his students, or at least use to expose them to something outside their comfort zones. His favorite destinations are all hundreds of miles away, everywhere from Big Bend National Park in Texas to New Hampshire's Great North Woods in winter. This time he's brought along assistant teacher Linda Vang, a former cop who looks almost as young as the students, but is much more comfortable in her own skin, and Rick, who believes that a bike can change a kid.

"A bike," Rick likes to say, "gives you the freedom to go where you want to go at a pace that allows you to take things in." You learn to push yourself, to get along with people you may not understand. Rick figured this out on a two-year, round-the-world cycling trip with his wife, Tanya, and his nonprofit, Two Wheel View, is all about passing on the message. It also gives him the chance to ride—on weekend day trips as well as months of travel as far away as South America and Scandinavia. Wherever he is, he likes nothing better than to sit around a campsite drinking strong coffee and telling stories.

Rick's program for the week will earn students two credits toward graduation with lessons in history, ecology, social interaction, and health and fitness. It will also be his second attempt to guide a Project Lead group down the Maah Daah Hey Trail, a 97-mile route that traverses the Badlands beginning on the western edge of the town of Medora. It's said the Maah Daah Hey could eventually become the next Moab, but right now it's intriguingly empty, and Rick and the other adults can hardly wait to begin. The teens are dubious, if not downright hostile.

"Last year, I wanted to do the whole trail," Rick says, "but after the first hour on bikes, I knew I had to scale back." This year's routes will be out-and-back, using the bus as a giant sag wagon. A typical recreational mountain biker might not view the 1-to-25-mile days as particularly tough, but these kids know nothing of singletrack or bike handling, and the stiff climbs that rise from this North Dakota moonscape will push them well beyond their limits.

"These kids will have to learn how to deal," Jeff says. "There's a lot that breaks them down emotionally, but not enough physical challenge. At some point, it's like the military. As the week goes along, their bodies will get stronger. They learn you can get mad, but you don't run away."

Still, he knows what to expect: There will be small acts of resistance—groans, tantrums, curses—and there may well be outright rebellion. So why bother? Jeff is familiar with all those weepy movies about teachers going into schools and turning around entire classes of troubled kids, sending them off to happier and more fulfilling lives. They're touching, but they're largely fantasy. "I don't watch those noble-teacher movies," Jeff says. "I can't stand them." You don't win over a classroom of troubled city kids by standing on a table and reciting poetry. Jeff knows that. He knows that with this crowd, in fact, nothing will win over the whole group, period. So he simply does what he knows best: He takes them far from home, shows them how to wear a helmet and grip the handlebar and puts them all on bikes.

And then he hopes that one of them, or maybe two or three, finds something to hold onto.

The next day, in a warm spring drizzle, the St. Paul teens and a gas-station clerk stare at each other. You can almost hear the clerk thinking: Why are black people passing through Mandan, North Dakota?

Fifty miles farther west, the land begins to undulate, and red canyons and buttes appear. Bodies pile out of the bus at a Civilian Conservation Corps campground a few miles from the Maah Daah Hey Trail.

"See this, girl? This is cow shit."

"No way. That's buffalo shit."

"How you know? You ain't never see no wild animals."

Today's ride is a 3-mile singletrack loop that could take 30 minutes or two hours, depending on the group's attitude.

"Doesn't matter," Rick says. "We're here to have fun."

The trail roller-coasters from canyon bottoms to butte tops, over dry creeks and chalky cliffs—scenic and remote, but doable. August, one of the few who rode enthusiastically the day before, quickly drops the rest of the pack, taking a wrong turn. Jeff is

dispatched to haul him back.

"You can't do that," Rick explains patiently. "You gotta stay with a partner. You could get lost out here."

August, who actually rides his bike to school, looks away. "Y'all ain't my babysitters. Y'all are haters."

But when two old couples appear on horses, he gathers around with the others, curious. "Are you all having fun out here?" one old lady asks. "You're from St. Paul? I think that's just wonderful!"

Sensing a politely captive audience, Loralena pushes to the front of the group. Standing in the middle of the trail, tough and red-haired, like a sort of hip-hop Annie Oakley, she launches into the story of the M tattooed on her arm: "My daughter's father thinks it's about him because his name is Mark, but I was, like, 13 then, and now it ain't about him, no matter what he thinks."

The boys try to hit a few jumps while the girls cheer, and everyone finishes the ride hungry and ready to chill at the campground. Then the adults decide to do a second loop, with or without kids.

Night around here is scarier for the kids, somehow, than the worst city neighborhood. "I've been in North Dakota before," says Laurie, sitting around the campfire. Dressed in black, with a short haircut and sinewy arms, she projects a butch look and a hardened past. "I got into some auto theft, and the judge sent me to one of these weird old Western towns," she says.

Laurie was 13 at the time, depressed because her best friend, also 13, had hung himself. "I wasn't mad, I was sad," she remembers. "We did everything together, steal cars, rob people's houses, all like that." They also had quieter times—Laurie still treasures the sketchbooks her friend left behind.

Back in Minnesota, she began losing ground at school, sliding into the orbit of two older brothers in jail who still functioned effectively as gang soldiers. Entering Project Lead felt like her last option. The idea of graduating from high school entered her head. In some ways, Project Lead is her family, complete with the annoying brothers, the dorky authority figures and Loralena, with whom she shares everything, including cigarettes and one side of the earbuds attached to her iPod. "Some kids can't sit still all day," Laurie says, "but I like it. I like science. Hate math. But I will graduate. I want to open up my own auto-body shop—do exteriors, interiors, everything."

"She's got that young name for it, too," Loralena chimes in. "Bow Down Customs."

The next morning, a park ranger arrives to direct the construction of a small hiking trail—one of Rick's "environmental awareness" activities. About 55, with Clint Eastwood looks and a starched uniform, the ranger enjoys his public, lecturing Project Lead on the habits of the buffalo whose hulking forms can be seen dimly through the rain. "Don't call them buffalo, my dears," he says. "That's an animal found only in Africa. These are bison."

Then he hands out pickaxes and shovels and sends everyone to work. The sun comes out.

"Everyone put on sunscreen," Jeff calls after them. "Even black folks. You sunburn just like the rest of us."

The ranger wanders around identifying birdcalls and dispensing natural wisdom to the oddly compliant teenagers. When bison bulls get sassy, he says, you shoot them with rock salt. The females eat their afterbirth.

"Thank you," Gina says, stunned and a little impressed—a departure from her usual indifference toward learning. "That was very informational."

But then the kids turn surly again when the adults start talking about another ride. You would think trail building was enough exertion for one day, but no.

"They lie."

"More than once they be doing this to us."

But then there's no reason for them to trust adults, beginning with parents who disappear only to return months later, full of promises that seldom pan out. Everyone has a story of betrayal. Each one begins in the age-old high school manner.

"One time? When my parents got real bad on crack, and I was living with my aunties?"

"One time? When there was a gang fight at Central and I hit him with a lunch tray and me and him both got kicked out?"

In between these incidents came long periods of inertia. Weeks of not going to school—you don't plan to ditch, but you like to sleep late. Months of waiting for housing, welfare checks, jobs, promises, anything, to happen. Years when you got pregnant

a couple of times and had to stay home and watch kids for whom you hope better things will come, if only you knew how to get them.

During the unplanned afternoon ride, nature pulls out the stops: a Mexican gray wolf (Yengke, the recovered meth addict, spots it first), the prehistoric call of a bison bull (Yengke comes within yards of him), the echoes in the canyons (Yengke yells "hello" in Hmong). The girls drop out after the first loop, but Yengke and August keep going, with Siem in the rear, not minding that he's slow. Big and quiet, the son of first-generation Cambodian parents who run a produce stand, he has no interest in the mutinous talk the rest of the group revels in. He reads, too. Fantasy novels are his favorite.

"It's beautiful here," he says. "It makes me want to explore places, see great pyramids and camels. All I have to do is keep pedaling."

That night, while everyone else bitches—"the problem with this bike trip is we ride these damn bikes too much"—Siem merely says, "I love it. Everything about it." And he spends the rest of the evening patching spare tubes. Rick files this away. One scholarship is available for his summer bike trip to Argentina. Siem could qualify if he can graduate before then and take time away from the UPS job that helps him support three sisters and a disabled mother. "Why I got to cook the rice?" comes a voice from the mess tent. "Because I'm Mexican?"

"That's right, girl. You cook that young rice."

In the dark, Loralena washes dishes, talking and talking, using the chance to unload about skipping school, doing drugs, all those visits from Child Protective Services, running away from home and her drug-addicted mom at 12 and taking a bus to the Indian reservation at Ft. Yates, where she'd heard there was family. It turned out there wasn't much to do there but play basketball and drink peppermint schnapps.

"Didn't nobody want me," she explains matter-of-factly. At 19, she's relatively settled, living with her two-year-old daughter and that daughter's one-year-old uncle.

"He's my mom's kid," Loralena explains. "My mom takes care of both of them while I'm at school. I just love my mom." Since her mom has been clean, anyway.

For the rest of the trip, Loralena cooks and washes dishes, enjoying a bossy, responsible mom role of her own.

Another day of riding the red-dirt trails convinces August—the group's most experienced rider, from his commute to school—that the thrill of getting air justifies the many faceplants along the way. He gets used to breaking a sweat and the slow pace of campsite living. He draws, filling up a sketchbook with birds, on and off the wing, and a rabbit he saw while riding, "running next to me, hauling ass, not even scared."

It's nothing like his last trip out of the city, when his father kicked him out with nothing but a garbage bag full of clothes. He'd gone to find his mother, in Minot, Minnesota, a small town full of white people. After a week, his softhearted stepmom drove up from St. Paul, saw August's bike leaning against a trailer, and rescued him.

"I got no respect for anyone but her," he says. "If it wasn't for her, I'd be doing some crazy shit. Now I wanna design stuff: graffiti, cars, art. You notice I kept myself tattoo free." No handmade names of ex-girlfriends scrawled on his arm. No "party dots"—the inked-in circles applied to the back of the hand at parties. Go to enough of these and you'll look like you have ink measles.

On the sixth day of the trip, ride leader Rick decides the kids can handle 10 miles of Maah Daah Hey interspersed with a hike. They set out in two contingents—the boys and Loralena, who has put her motherly role aside and is openly excited to ride, and the larger girls, who have learned to pace themselves and ride patiently instead of sullenly.

Laurie, who usually sticks close to Loralena, can't decide where she belongs. "When we get to that river, I'm turning back," she grumbles. "I get an asthma attack, I stop right here." But she keeps riding, slowly moving toward the middle of the group.

"I never felt so healthy," Yengke exults with his typical enthusiasm, chewing on a Clif Bar. "Look, look! A female grasshopper, y'all! Just hopping along! Check it!"

"We're just going along easy," August agrees, "shifting gears at a nice pace. Covering ground, you know."

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing," Siem says.

After dumping their bikes in a communal pile at Mile Marker 61, the group hikes, in the best mood they've been in all week, despite the occasional phlegmy smoker's cough. Loralena squeezes her compact body into an ancient ice cave. The other kids pile up behind her, marveling at the sustained chill on a 90-degree day. A diamondback's rattle rings out like an alarm

clock, right where Yengke was about to step.

"That scared the living shit out of me," he proudly announces that night in camp. "I guess I'm thankful," says Brittany, a big, tall girl in childlike pink sweats. "I would never go camping if y'all didn't make me. I'm not the type. I did play softball once, but only because I like to swing a bat. I get a rush from that feeling. I'm a bad kid. I fight."

"You're a bad role model," Yengke suggests.

"No, but I'm a brat."

"Violence is not the answer."

"I'm not violent!" Brittany insists. "I just got violent ways!"

Yet the atmosphere is oddly G-rated—marshmallows by the fire and teens braiding each other's hair, quietly discussing how last winter's camping trip was better than this.

"They always do that," Jeff says. "On the trip, they're cranky and swear they hate every minute of it. In a month or so, when we're back at school, they'll be telling each other, 'You remember when we rode down that cliff in North Dakota? That was so tight.'"

On the last day, there is a tiny hint of sentimentality in the air. That night, the kids give the surprised adults autographed Maah Daah Hey T-shirts.

Loading the bus for the long drive home, people plan their transitions from the wilderness. Loralena and Laurie schedule two things: high school graduation, together, next winter, and some weekend soon, a party featuring a tub of grain alcohol and juice.

Jeff refined his ritual years ago. He comes home, gets a cold beer from the fridge and carries it into a shower, where he stays for as long as the hot water holds out. The trip has rewarded and exhausted him, and sometimes he imagines smoother ones.

"I'd like to go to Sedona," he says, "just three or four kids and three or four adults. We'd all be at the same level, riding four or five hours a day. Maybe I'd say, 'Kids, you do the grilling. Tell me when it's done. You guys be the adults and I'll be a kid.'"

### **September, Project Lead Classroom, St. Paul**

During summer break, Jeff, Rick and two friends formed Team Party Dot and completed a 24-hour mountain bike race, in which they finished respectably. It's now been nearly four months since the Maah Daah Hey trip and school's been in session for six weeks. Jeff's still waiting for textbooks. "I don't think we're gonna get them, either," he says.

It doesn't help that Linda Vang's assistant-teaching job was eliminated, turning Project Lead into a one-man classroom with 25 kids, and seldom the same 25, either. The class is inside a St. Paul Area Learning Center, an alternative-education option for 16-to 19-year-olds who can't make it in traditional high schools. Located in a rough neighborhood across from the Love Doctor adult store, the school feels like a ghetto version of a Fame set, with noisy, enthusiastic kids crowding the halls. Sometimes the action gets borderline violent. Right now, for some reason, a lot of kids seem to be singing.

"It can feel like an ER around here," Jeff says. "You get people bandaged up and determine what level of trauma they're at, try to find the right treatment, and then grab the next one and move them along."

Today, he'll focus on American history, as seen through blues music. Rather than lecture, Jeff divides the class into small groups and gets them started on designing podcasts. Bits of nonblues tunes float through the air and kids talk about tomorrow's bike trip, a one-day ride along the banks of the Mississippi.

"Is that gonna be any fun?" a boy asks. "'Cause August, you said biking was pretty tight." "It's okay," says August, who still commutes to school on his Trek—which isn't to say he comes regularly. On the other hand, it looks as if he may graduate this year. So will Loralena. Laurie still needs to pass the basic math-skills test, but she thinks she can pull it off in time to graduate with Loralena.

Siem, who spent his evenings on the North Dakota trail patching tubes, graduated last spring, then left with Rick and Two Wheel View for Argentina, where he taught South American kids to dance hip-hop and sometimes rode 50 miles a day. But no one's seen or heard from him since. He might have moved away, they hear, or enlisted, in which case he's on his way to Iraq.

Brittany got beat up in front of the projects where she lives. After that, she never came back to school.

Yengke disappeared. Meth again—or at least that's the rumor.

Rick is preparing to move Two Wheel View to Calgary, where he'll work with First Nations kids. He hopes to take some to North Dakota this spring to ride the Maah Daah Hey with Jeff and Project Lead. Tomorrow's ride will be his last in Minnesota.

A fire alarm goes off—a furniture store across the alley is burning down. School is therefore closed for the rest of the day, but not before August and Laurie promise to show up for the ride on time.

But when the next day comes, they don't show up at all. Of the 10 original Maah Daah Hey kids, only Loralena arrives, though at least 20 new riders fill in the slots. The ride is a mostly flat out-and-back along the river bottoms, with lots of mud and underbrush and a cable-ferry crossing. A girl named Peaches loses control on a downhill and rides into a black-mud lagoon, trashing her Playboy Bunny jeans. A boy named Jabar turns out to be fast, and soon figures out how to get even faster. Waiting for the rest of the group at the turnaround point, he kicks back under the willows, throwing rocks at an abandoned train trestle until a friend catches up.

"Hey Jabar," the kid says, "you think you ever be doing this when you're not in school?"

"Why not?"

Good question, but it doesn't have an answer. By winter break, Peaches, Jabar and several of the others have stopped coming to school.

### **Two Years Later: Battle Creek Regional Park, St. Paul**

Two years have passed since Laurie last rode a bike, but this reunion is officially her trip, and she's given it a name: the Long Ass Ride. An 8-mile trail ride from Minneapolis to St. Paul seems reasonable to Jeff, who now spends a lot of time in the saddle as a volunteer leader with Trips for Kids and on excursions with Rick and Two Wheel View. Worn out by relentless budget cuts, he left Project Lead, worked at a school for emotionally disturbed kids, then moved to the county's juvenile detention center, where he teaches classes in math and social studies. The population changes almost daily, and although the students' ages range from 12 to 18, some barely read at a second-grade level. But the job fits Jeff's personality.

"The classic line I hear is, 'I didn't do anything and I don't know why I'm here,'" he says. "But for the most part you don't even know they're criminals. They want to learn and they're in a place where they don't have to be thugs. They don't have to be looking over their shoulder or worrying where their food is coming from. They get a little adult attention that's positive. Some kid in for attempted murder will come into my classroom whining about, 'Oh, my stomach hurts so bad.' All he wants to hear me say is, 'You know what? You're gonna be all right.'" Once in a while, that happens. Laurie, for instance, passed her math exam, graduated, got a full-time job at an automotive repair shop and plans to enter community college in the spring. "I think I might be getting somewhere," she says.

As befits the future owner of Bow Down Customs, Laurie drives an heirloom 1981 Toronado. Cars are about all she has in common anymore with Loralena, the only other Maah Daah Hey vet who's here for the ride.

"I got watts," Loralena announces. "You should hear my bass. I'm bangin'!"

"That right? Girl, you don't know what I got in my trunk."

"Yeah, but I'm bangin' so hard! I got the banginest car!" But Loralena's true prize possession is the graduation ring engraved with the words Project Lead, which proves she made it all the way through high school. Linda Vang, also here for the Long Ass Ride, went to see her graduate even after her teaching-assistant position was cut.

Jeff holds the ring up to the light, possibly wondering if he'll ever see another. He knows it won't be long until Project Lead is downsized out of existence. (The program was shuttered in June 2009).

Rick, who has flown in from Calgary for the occasion, shows up with bikes for Laurie and Loralena, scrounged from a Two Wheel View stash.

The girls adjust their helmets and remember the rules from two and a half years ago: All you have to do is ride the bike and treat each other like human beings.

Rick decides to build goodwill by taking it easy, following a gentle trail through red-gold autumn trees to bluffs overlooking the Mississippi. Laurie threatens an asthma attack, just for old time's sake, after one of the trip's few challenging hills.

But the uphill eventually becomes a downhill, at which point the two girls become a little more daring than their old Maah Daah Hey selves, screaming through the switchbacks and enjoying the speed. Laurie flies over her handlebar twice, but can't seem to muster up a discouraging word.

"Dude, I should really do this more," she tells Rick. "I should get in shape. I should ride on weekends." She gives Jeff a critical look. "I should ride with you next weekend," she decides, but he already has a trip planned—in Marin County, California, at a Trips for Kids meeting he's been looking forward to for months.

"That time?" Loralena says, "in North Dakota? It was good for us. We had to get out of our box. You know—your friends, your distractions, your drugs, your drinking, your phone."

"No, here's what it was," Laurie says. "You had to get along with other people. You had to, because there was no one else out there. I've used that. I've said okay, this situation right here is like mountain biking in North Dakota. If I can get through that, I can get through this."

"What about now?" Rick asks. "You wanna keep riding?"

"We should do that last hill again," Laurie says. "That last steep hill was the best."

"Yes!" Loralena agrees. "I'm thinking to myself, I can't do it, I can't, and then I'm like yes, yes I can!"

"Did you see me fly over them handlebars?"

"You flew," Loralena says. "You flew!"

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