

MY LONG BIKE BACK

By Pearson Constantino

I've been a cyclist all my life. I love the fresh white noise of the air whooshing through my hair and into my ears. I love the invigorating burn of that first hill and the tears that swell in my eyes from the cold wind. The solitude and the remarkable grace of riding are the closest I can come to being totally free.

I grew up in the Finger Lakes of Upstate New York, full of open roads and glorious rolling hills. My father and older brother taught me to ride on the bluffs over the glacial cut lake and old traffic-free roads that cut the dairy farms and rows of endless cornfields. Riding was never about exercise it was a ritual of freedom, expressed in the countless sunsets and moonrises I witnessed over the lake. Often I would contemplate a career in competitive cycling as I raced through imaginary stages of the Tour De France.

In 1999, I moved to New York City to study music at the Purchase Conservatory. With me was my brother's old blue Peugeot mountain bike. I rode that machine all over this new place and even spent time as a bike messenger.

After graduating I continued my ardent cycling addiction and as I earned more money I bought a better bike. I logged nearly 10K miles in the saddle and wore out my cyclometer. Then in June 2006, while I was on a routine ride, I was hit by an SUV on Central Park Avenue, a Westchester County Bike Route, in Greenburgh, New York.

Trapped under a parked Ford Explorer, with a shattered hip, femur, crushed lumbar vertebrae and severe head trauma, I came to and glanced at my mangled bike. I became instantly aware what had happened, though not realizing the driver had left me there alone to die.

I tried moving myself out from under the truck bed, but the lifeless weight of my leg dominated any effort to help myself. Then came pain, unlike anything I've ever experienced, suffocating throngs of useless pain, shot up and down my spine, before I could assess another way of getting out the pain knocked me out until I woke up in a sweaty ambulance.

In the hospital, where I spent the next nine days, I endured a battery of nauseating brain scans and a surgery to reconnect my leg. I laid on that bed with a constant reminder that someone else had done this to me. Someone else hit me hard enough to break the strongest bone in my body and then left me, left me like I was nothing.

After 22 months of treatments, an additional surgery to repair my spine and more physical therapy I am left with staggering pain, yet I've returned to the bike. Dreaming of that irreplaceable sensation and freedom that comes with riding I willed myself to heal faster. It's ironic but being on a bike is the only time I don't feel insignificant, the only time I feel safe and free from the pain that keeps me uncomfortable, keeps me taking medication and keeps me in therapy.

Now when the rides begin those first few strokes on the pedals are made with a reckless childlike abandon. Despite an overwhelming sensation of doing something I know I shouldn't, like staying for one more beer or eating an extra cookie. The feeling that I'm doing something I shouldn't be allowed to do feels wholly inappropriate yet so gratifying.

Often I'm asked about anger and the injustice of what happened. Do I ever think of the driver who struck me? I usually answer no. Which is not true, of course I think of him, I want him to know his habits behind the wheel that morning forever altered my life. But I am using anger as motivation to ride, to share my story and to work to change the driving culture of our roads.

I am now focused on inspiring more people to get on bicycles and to encourage everyone to be more aware while driving. It is with this goal that my brother Peter and I will click into our pedals on August 12th in Newport, Oregon and head east. We will ride 3500 miles along US Route 20 all the way to Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Along this Main Street America, I'll be sharing my story by reaching out to schools, cycle organizations and communities through 12 states. A documentary film, THE LONG BIKE BACK, is being made about the trip. THE LONG BIKE BACK (www.longbikeback.com) has chronicled my recovery and training and the film crew will follow my brother and me every mile for the 50 days that we're out seeing America from our bikes. My dream is to inspire everyone to get on a bicycle and experience the incredible freedom of traveling by the power of their own legs. This will also make them better, more aware drivers. The more cyclists there are on the road, the safer the roads will be for all.