**In search of adventure? TGBT is the answer!**

I've arrived in Washington D.C. many times in my life, usually by car or plane. But never by bike, and never with such an overwhelming sense of pride and accomplishment. It took four days pedaling through a 184.5-mile national park to get there, but there is something uniquely different about this adventure. It’s not about finishing but about the shared process. You want to do it again with the “Dog Team” and also invite others; it means more accomplishing it together.

Life is short and unpredictable. I learned it from an early age and it always drove me towards getting every last drop of the time we have here on this earth. For many years it meant going on long road trips with friends across different sections of the United States, big sports and entertainment events, and physical challenges like climbing the White Mountains. I wanted to make sure “I did it all.” The next generation uses the term FOMO; you older folks can Google it.

In 2006, I moved from Baltimore and arrived to my first day of work as a social worker at San Mar Family & Community Services in Western Maryland and learned about their annual July fundraising bicycle event, The Great Bicycle Tour of the Historic C&O Canal (TGBT), a 4-day event covering close to 200 miles on a bicycle. It sounded up my alley except one thing: Bicycle? I hadn’t ridden one since I had a Huffy mountain bike in middle school. With friendly peer pressure from some silver haired co-workers who regularly rode, wondering if I had what it takes, I signed up without a real plan and said, “Bring it.”

That Spring I pulled out that old Huffy from my mom’s garage, and after several months of doing some practice I was shocked how terrible I was at riding, as kids and grandparents alike zipped passed me on the trails. I learned that for a reasonable amount of money I could get a bicycle designed for trail riding that could more closely fit my 6’10’’ body. Apparently using your rusty middle school bike isn’t wise. Having the basic tools is always a good step in accomplishing any task, but as an outrageously giant person, this is always part of my personal adventure.

That summer I was welcomed with open arms into a group of kindred spirits, great people looking for a bucket list experience of good clean fun together. What also became clear to me is that just about anyone can do this event if they are willing to commit to putting in the “seat time” and train in advance. My initiation was immediate, all I had to do was sign-up. We call the riders the Dog Team, and everyone who successfully completes the ride joins the Dog Team, because by committing to the heroic journey they are also retrievers of funds to support families in need; it’s a badge of honor, and the camaraderie is special.

For those not in the know, the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal is one of the great treasures of America, following 184.5 miles alongside the Potomac River, from deep into the mountains of Western Maryland into the heart of Washington D.C. at the Georgetown waterfront. One of the original advocates of the C & O canal was Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, who fought for its conservation by hiking the entire distance in the winter to block highway development, explained, "The stretch of 185 miles of country from Washington, DC to Cumberland, Maryland is one of the most fascinating and picturesque in the Nation…It is a refuge, a place of retreat, a long stretch of quiet and peace…a wilderness area where we can commune with God and nature, a place not yet marred by the roar of wheels and the sound of horns."

The diversity of the sights and sounds during those almost 200 miles is highlighted by overwhelming beauty and an immersion deep into tranquil nature under a canopy of trees, with landmarks along the way including the Paw Paw Tunnel, Fort Frederick, Harpers Ferry, Great Falls, and endless small American towns. It’s a rain or shine deal, in July where 90 degrees isn’t unusual but the shade of trees keeps it very comfortable.

I had so much fun I decided to do it again a second year, and my enthusiasm convinced my now wife to join. When we were at Mile Marker 95, we looked back at the clouds and they looked awfully dark. Being in the middle of nowhere, she looked to me and said "What do we do?" I responded with the only real option, "We need to move fast." After about a mile the wind moved in and started blowing the trees around, and we started hearing thunder. Our pace picked up faster, at this point we were riding faster than we knew we could on the dirt trail. With five miles left we got bombarded with rain and wind and thunder, and let's not forget the occasional lighting. The rain was refreshing and fear provoking at the same time, because our only option was to press on or hide. So for the next five miles, we rode through what felt like a typhoon at Mach speed. The dirt trail was now a river, and the turnabouts next to us on the actual Potomac river had water crashing against them. We arrived at the rendezvous point at mile marker 88 and the event staff vehicles were there waiting. Event staff member Top Dog was waiting in a vehicle and peaked his head out the door and said "are you having fun yet!?", to which I responded with the roar of victory. We were covered from head to toe in mud and soaked to the equivalent of having fallen in a pool. All the riders enjoyed dinner and had their stories of riding to tell at the campgrounds and hotels that night, which always brings back the legendary tales of the past 30 years of TGBT events. Inevitably the tales get more exaggerated every year.

As you look over at other riders you see so many returning faces, parents start bringing their kids and it becomes an annual reunion of close friends. I’ve been involved in the event every year since, as a part of a small army of staff that make the event the best possible experience for our riders, making sure that every 10 miles or so there is endless food, supplies and help, and a fair amount of wacky costumes and cheerleading; there’s really no better way to do it. With limited registration near 150 riders, it remains a best kept secret.

Wheaties Dog

TGBT XXXIV is scheduled for a safe ride on July 10-13, 2021. Learn more about the event and register at: <https://sanmartgbt.org/>

*San Mar Family & Community Services is a 137-year old nationally accredited and recognized organization providing foster care, mental health and community-based prevention services. To learn more about their important and transformative work, go here:* [*www.sanmarhope.org*](http://www.sanmarhope.org)

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