

"A witty, poignant memoir from one of the most important figures in America's urban bicycling renaissance." – Jeff Mapes, author, "Pedaling Revolution"



Joyride

***Pedaling Toward A
Healthier Planet***

by Mia Birk

with Joe "Metal Cowboy" Kurmaskie

Eric,

for

the

Joyride!

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Mia

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Bicycling Home

The sun beats down on my head unchecked. My helmet acts as a convection oven, but it's the only thing preventing combustion. Forget frying eggs on the sidewalk; one could open a nice little breakfast bar on this blacktop.

We set out early enough, but the cool of the morning feels like a lifetime ago. At 2 p.m. it's a balmy 114 degrees in the shade, for some of which I would give my right arm, a vast fortune and my virginity. OK, someone's virginity.

Instead, I'm lying in a parking lot by the side of a humongous road just a few tantalizing miles from the finish of the Wildflower Ride near my alma mater, Richardson High School. Does a thick patch of stinkweed a few feet from my face qualify as wildflowers?

Three miles from the finish line, 57 miles under my saddle, I've bonked – an unpleasant combo of Texas heat, cloying humidity pulled in from the Gulf of Mexico, and perhaps my lack of training inside a sauna. Then again, these temperatures aren't meant for man or beast, certainly not those from dreary but lush Portland, Oregon. I close my eyes, click my heels three times and mutter, "There's no place like home, there's no place like home."

Crap, I'm still here. No matter how hard I wish for a transporter machine, SAG wagon or catapult, I'm stuck.

Having recently won a decade-long battle with severe back pain through an impressive fitness routine, Russell, my buff, hyper-competitive youngest brother, had egged me on, well past my comfort zone.

"Come on, Mia," he had urged. "I've never gotten to ride with you before."

"Gotten" to ride with me? No one in this family has ever *wanted* to ride with me! Where's my *#@\$#\$ brother anyway? Relaxing at the finish line without a thought of me in his head? Pure folly to think I could keep up with him. He left me in the dust 15 miles ago. Beating older Sis must be a thrill for him.

So now here I am, in the latter stages of heat-induced mania, giggling madly. "Mom's gonna be really mad when Russell shows up without me..."

"Can I help you?" I open my eyes to a fine pair of lycra-clad legs. Greg, a

hunky guy I was riding with back when the world still made sense, hands me a bottle of Gatorade, a bag of caffeinated jelly beans, and a pack of pick-me-up strawberry-flavored “goo” – like a shot of cake frosting. Tears of gratitude stream down my cheeks.

By the time I feel human again, Greg has vanished, presumably off doing more good deeds. The last few miles I share with other stragglers hugging the side of the road. We pray no Hummer, SUV or pickup-truck driver will mow us down, as we weave and wobble to the finish line.



This unglamorous ride was made possible by Eric Van Steenburg, executive director of the Friends of the Katy Trail. He'd flown me to Dallas to help answer a question posed to him by arts patron Deedie Rose, who, with her warm, lilting Southern accent and blond chin-length bob, reminds me of my stepmother Diane.

“I want to ride my bike from the Katy Trail to my office. What will it take to make that happen?” Deedie asked Eric.

The wildly popular Katy Trail has truly lassoed people's imaginations. In 1997, a coalition of community members and city leaders banded together to preserve the greenbelt along which the former Missouri-Kansas-Texas (MKT or “Katy”) Railroad traveled through Dallas. They envisioned an urban park featuring a pedestrian and bicycle path set among 30 acres of nature – all in the densest part of the city.



The Katy Trail in Dallas.

Managed by the nonprofit Friends of the Katy Trail, thanks to 1,200-plus dues-paying members, the concrete bike trail and adjacent soft-surface running path are clean and well-maintained. After surviving the Wildflower Ride, I joined Russell and his wife Gali at a restaurant just off the Katy on Knox Street. Hundreds of people passed by in the hour we drank a bottle of wine and ate a light Italian meal. With more than 300,000 people claiming a home or workplace within a mile of the trail, it's no wonder it is packed day and night.

Like most urban trails, the Katy Trail has spurred economic development. Lovely new townhouses and restaurants have popped up in close proximity, and trailside properties sell for 40 percent higher than identical ones just a few blocks away.

This in turn drove away the bad guys. That hasn't stopped the local media from having a field day any time there is an incident, though. One TV station actually referred to the Katy as “a corridor of crime.” The reality, the Dallas chief

of police said during a press conference, is this: The only reason you hear any stories about incidents on the Katy is because they're so unusual.

In the first six months of 2008, more than 200 incidences of crime – including a person getting shot in the face – occurred at high-tone North Park Mall, where big-haired Texas fashionistas drop gobs of cash to accessorize appropriately with their latest spring wardrobe. In the same period, the Katy recorded but one incident: a flasher who was considered art by the passersby until he started to move.

To answer Deedie Rose's question, as Eric tells it, "I knew just who to call."



"A year ago, I was in Portland for a conference," he explains to a handful of key Dallas uptown/downtown movers and shakers who have mobilized in response to Rose's call to action. We're gathered in the office of Angela Hunt, a trim and youthful City Councilwoman stylishly dressed in a tasteful, muted fuchsia bouclé skirt and jacket. In addition to four power brokers, we've got a public works representative, Keith Manoy. A middle-aged man with kind eyes, he reminds me of Morgan Freeman. Behind him is a wall-sized aerial photograph of downtown Dallas and, at Eric's end, a whiteboard and screen.

As Eric begins his presentation, I wave off an offer from Hunt's assistant for weak coffee and nondairy powdered creamer (Portland has changed my coffee standards forever).

"Alta's George Hudson led a walking tour of Portland," explains Eric. "We walked to the Portland streetcar, which took us to a trail along the river and just like that, we were in another world!" Pacing the room like a panther in a too-small cage, he hunches, talks with his hands and swings his shoulders like a weightlifter posing. Every so often he rakes his fingers through his sandy brown hair for emphasis. A background in communications serves him well in raising funds and pushing forward the Katy Trail.

I'm ready to get out my checkbook.

"Then – get this – the trail took us to an aerial tram spanning a freeway. Apparently, it was built to deal with the traffic problems on the roads leading up to the city's largest employer, Oregon Health & Science University. It was like taking a bubble-shaped glass elevator in the sky. We walked back down the mountain along a nature trail to where we started. It was awesome!"

Eric's personal tour of Portland ended well after dark, standing at a light-rail platform next to a woman with her bike. "Downtown was full of life even then," he marvels. "And then, we got on the train, where the bike hooks were already full! This is what I want to see in downtown Dallas."

Eric introduces me to the assembled group as a relocated Dallas native.

"I'm so happy to be here today. Truly, I'm honored to be part of this exciting project." Helping make Dallas more bicycle-friendly makes me giddy. I've always

seen Dallas as chock-full of improvement opportunities, but I long ago gave up on the idea that it would ever realize its potential. "Prove me wrong," I silently beg.



Dallas occupies a special place in the history of bikeway planning and implementation, for it was ruled for 17 years by a unique guy, Paul Winter. On his personal blog, he bragged that he *"got rid of the city's only bike lane after 15 years of trying, and thereby honored by Bicycling Magazine and the League of American Bicyclists' executive director as working for America's 'worst city for bicycling'."*

In the rest of the world, a bicycle coordinator's job is to facilitate bikeway development and encourage bicycle use. On Paul's planet, of which he was ruler and sole occupant, the bicycle coordinator's job is the opposite.

"As long as I'm the bike coordinator, Dallas will never have on-street bike lanes," said Paul to a bike shop owner. Only people confident enough to "take the lane" on busy roads should be out cycling, in his mind.

As a result, Dallas' car-dominant streets sport nothing but a mish-mash of numbered "bike route" signs that you're supposed to decode with a huge fold-out map last published in 1992. I tried to do this once, and found myself terrified, on busy roads, unclear where the numbers were taking me. Then the signs disappeared. Motorists buzzed by, honking, yelling "Get off the road!" One hurled a beer can, another spit.

"Oh, honey, it's not safe riding a bike here," my stepmother Diane soothed. "But you could ride around White Rock Lake." Meaning, you can drive your bike to the only other trail and ride in circles. Which I did, along with a zillion other starved-for-options people.

You reap what you sow; with no bikeways, precious few use bikes for transportation. As of 2008, you are five times more likely to be killed on a bicycle in Dallas than in Portland.



"In the next decade we plan to have 30,000 downtown residents. We must make Dallas more pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly," states Councilwoman Hunt with a serious look on her heart-shaped face.

Like a fish gasping for water, I start gasping for breath. "Whoa," I say. "Hold the phone. Back up a sec. We're in Dallas, right?"

I grew up here, and come back to visit regularly. In Dallas, you drive. Downtown Dallas is largely a pedestrian-unfriendly pit, with incomplete or obstructed sidewalks, big wide roads, few pedestrian crossings, no shade trees. To me, going downtown means getting lost while trying to find the correct highway.

At my 20th high school reunion, midnight signaled a transition from the formal party to a bar "around the corner." (In Portland, when we say that a restaurant is around the corner, it's literally a short walk around the actual corner

of the actual block on which one is standing.) A car full of whooping, hollering old gal-pals then drove down the highway for about 20 miles. In Dallas, that's "around the corner."

Saying good-bye to my parents in a restaurant parking lot once, my kids caught a glimpse of a McDonald's playland across the street. We started toward the bright yellow tubes. "Mia, what are you doing?" asked a bewildered Diane.

"Um... crossing the street... Kids gotta get out their spilkes..."

"Oh, honey, no no no... not safe. Please, take your car."

Oy.

The Dallas Metropolex is sprawled in all directions. Most Dallasites cannot imagine getting around any other way than driving. With the exception of light rail and bus expansion systems, all public works, development and business priorities have been on motor vehicle movement. Period. End of story.

The people in this room are singing a very un-Dallaslike tune. What is going on?



Given Dallas' notoriously bike-hostile history, my advice to our steering committee is to start small with bike lanes, sharrows or bike boulevards.

Councilwoman Hunt, fresh from a trip to Copenhagen, strongly asserts, "People will just drive on bike lanes. Cycle tracks are the best solution."

"I don't disagree with you," I reply. "I just want to be clear about the trade-offs. Since cycle tracks are attached to the sidewalk, they take precedence over every driveway and side street. That is going to be a major change for motorists. Also, you need to add in separate bicycle signals at every major intersection, meaning more delay for motorists."

I look Angela in the eyes. "Also, national transportation guidelines don't endorse this kind of innovative design yet, and your public works department – no disrespect to you, Keith – is not supportive of even bike lanes, let alone cycle tracks."

"Look," says Bill Mabus, vice president of the company building the fancy new Ritz hotel. "We need full separation from motor vehicles."

Translation: "We don't give a rip about the national standards. We've got the money and power to do it right the first time. Got it?"

Angela turns to Keith, "I know that this plan is pushing the limits for y'all. I want y'all to have an open mind, OK? I am confident that you will be able to



This "cycle track" in Amsterdam is on a separate level from both motorists and pedestrians.

direct your team toward a 'yes.'" Everyone nods in agreement. I wish Rob was here in this roomful of permission-avoiding Texans. Must be where I get it from.

I feel something akin to ecstasy, listening to her not-too-subtle encouragement. I take a deep breath and add, "Keith, I grew up here, and I love coming back to visit my family. I see opportunity everywhere. Dallas is ripe for a Bicycle Plan. Given that y'all have been philosophically and forcefully opposed to any and all bikeway facilities, I'm curious to know your reaction."

"You know, Mia," he says thoughtfully, "it's time for us to change."

"On-street parking will have to be removed on Routh Street." I inform the group. "Parking removal is always a huge challenge, believe me." The battle over Portland's Northeast 47th is going to look like my daughter's kindergarten class tug-of-war compared to the full-out battle royale that will ensue on this street of upscale boutiques when we announce the parking/cycle tracks trade.

"Again," I suggest, "you could start small, by either turning the street into a bicycle boulevard or placing sharrows on the road."

Boots Reader, another upscale property owner, chuckles. "Sure, I hear ya. But heck, do you know how many parking spaces are out there already? Thousands, maybe?"

"It's time we stopped being so wimpy," he adds. "If we want things to change, we have to change them."



A few months later, the city quietly shifts Paul Winter, on the verge of retirement anyway, to another position. The reign of the ruler of a strange and isolated planet comes to an end.



Over the next year, Deedie Rose's request for a single route morphs into a full network of bikeways and walkways. Whereas the Katy Trail was built on a railroad right-of-way, the Uptown/Downtown Arts Loop, as we name it, will be integrated into the roadway network. Is Dallas truly ready for such a radical departure?

For the answer, Eric and I head to a meeting with Gabriel Barbier-Müeller, Swiss-born developer of high-rise luxury condos predicated on the success of high-density living experiences in the world's most cosmopolitan cities. Two of Gabriel's target audiences are educated 20- and 30-somethings who grew up on the urban comedies "Seinfeld" and "Friends", and retirees attracted to downtown's world-class cultural options. His clients also include former suburbanites who want control of their time. The first resident of the Azure luxury condo tower, for example, traded a 29-mile commute for a nine-miler, putting him in closer proximity to his grandchildren and netting him a larger, hassle-free shared pool.

Iced tea awaits at our meeting with Gabriel, who enters the room with an entourage of female assistants in business suits. I know better than to ask for hot tea this time.

We are allotted 20 minutes to make our pitch, as his helicopter is waiting on the roof to take him to his private jet, which is taking him to Barcelona after a stop at the Olympics in Beijing.

Eric tells his Deedie Rose story, while I hand out maps showing the various streets under consideration. Practically the entirety of one of the streets, Harwood, named for Gabriel's company, is owned by this one man.

"Harwood is a perfect street to connect the Katy to the Arts District," I pitch, and pass around photos of bike lanes in Portland and Boulder, and cycle tracks in Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Geneva. The catch: prohibition of on-street parking. "However," I admit, "there's not enough room for both on-street parking and world-class bikeways and walkways."

The room falls silent as Gabriel considers. His assistants busily text and e-mail on their handheld devices. A hundred degrees outside yet frigid in the room, I hug my jacket close and am sweating nonetheless. There is no doubt that his opposition will torpedo the project.

Then he stands, straightens his suit jacket, and offers his verdict. "Why would we use space on the street to store cars?" His steely, silvery good looks and intensity stop me from mistaking this statement for a real question. "We want the street to be crackling with life. Our residents will be able to walk from the Azure to the opera or a concert at the American Airlines Center. We are not just creating a place to live but an urban *lifestyle*."



Eric and I walk back to the Katy Trail office in the scorching sun, delighted. Over the next few months, every single stakeholder with whom we meet cheers us on with, "This sounds fantastic. How can I help?" Many agree to either allow the trail on their private property or fund their segment.

Normally I encounter so much resistance. Why in Dallas, Texas, of all places, do I find such a unified and enlightened spirit?

If these can-do, action-oriented business leaders succeed, the rest of us will have no excuses, none at all. Of course, there's nowhere to go but up when you're the nation's worst city for cycling. But, as postulated in the fascinating business book "Good to Great", it's often easier to go from bad to great than from good to great. I think – I hope – that Dallas will show us that, in a big way.



In 2008, I am again home for a visit and to present the final Katy Trail Arts Loop Plan. The positive feedback from the crowd of almost 100 lifts me so high, I can barely see the ground. No longer can I deny the evolving attitudes.

After the meeting, I find my 72-year-old stepfather, Tommy, at home in his comfy chair watching the Blue Planet series.

"Can you believe the amount of plastic that has been dumped into the nation's oceans?" he asks, tearing his eyes away from the TV to give me a hug.

Eyes back on the Blue Planet, he continues, "Back in the '60s, we designed a collection system that dumped waste oil and chemicals into the Houston ship channel, for a tank farm. The water was so corrosive that it ate the paint off the bottom of the ships, and the chemicals would burn on the surface. This was standard procedure for the industry."

His regretful tone gives me pause. Is this the same man who lambasted my career as freakishly out of touch with reality? I keep quiet as he continues, "I'm not saying I'm proud of it, Mia. The conservationists put so much pressure on the industry to clean up the channel that we spent the next 10 years installing pollution control equipment. As a result of that, by 1972 people could fish in the channel."

He gets up and beckons me to follow him to the garage, a place of extreme male organization, with all manners of tools hanging from cork-board pegs. Displayed proudly is a new Marin carbon-fiber road bike.

"What the...? Tommy? This beauty yours?"

"Go ahead – pick it up," he orders. "It only weighs 23 pounds."

But that isn't all. Stashed in his welding shop are another bike, helmet and fingerless biking gloves. They're for me.

My mom beams proudly. "Of all his hobbies so far, this is my favorite." (Tommy's hobbies have included race-car driving, sailboating, remote control mini-sailboating and metal sculpting.)

"He's in the best shape of his life. Just look at him!" He rides every night around his Carrollton, Texas, subdivision. The streets are quiet, but to get a workout means going around in circles. He and his biking buds – all men in their 60s and 70s – want long, safe riding options.

"You know, Mia, I used to think you were crazy, but you were just ahead of your time." He hands me a Dallas Morning News editorial that reads,

"Most people around Dallas would define 'hike' as what happens when you get a bad parking spot. 'Neighborhood' means anything within five freeway exits. 'Mass transit' is the blob of traffic inching ahead in rush hour. The car culture may be dominant in these parts, but counter-cultural forces are busy trying to entice us out of our guzzlers and onto our feet. The Friends of the Katy Trail, for one, has announced an exciting new project to connect center city neighborhoods and downtown through a network of hike and bike paths. It can't come soon enough."

My mom hugs me, pride in her eyes. "I finally get what you mean about bicycling being so good for the world. It sure is good for Tommy, and that's good for me."

Bicycling Home

If folks like Tommy are embracing a vision of a healthier world, we've come further than I ever dreamed. And if we can make Dallas into a bicycle-friendly place, then, in Tommy's words, "By gawd, I s'pect y'all kin do it anywhere."



Tommy, always lovable (left). Now fit as a fiddle (right).