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WHY I LOVE BICYCLE TOURING

STORY BY **BIANCA GIAEVER**

→ MY FRIEND DANNY and I had been bicycling for six weeks. The weather in Tennessee felt like we were pedaling through a sauna. A line of cars and motorcycles had stopped and waited for about 15 minutes so we could ride uphill through a mile-long construction zone. When we finally appeared over the hill's crest, sweating and panting, the Harley riders cheered and whooped. Heads popped out of sunroofs and car windows to shout encouragement. This was confusing. It was like the Tour de France.

Danny and I were on a nine-week bicycle trip around the country as part of our Davis Projects for Peace grant (davisprojectsforpeace.org). Three years ago, a woman named Katherine Davis gave a million dollars on her 100th birthday to fund college student projects that promoted a more peaceful world. She found the projects to be so impressive that she has continued to fund them every year since (and she is now 104)! For our project, we interviewed military veterans as we

bicycled around the U.S. and compiled a collection of personal war stories (warinvoice.org). As soon as we started looking for veterans, we found them everywhere. Everyone we talked to seemed to know a veteran nearby, and we also met veterans in stores, on the beach, or in restaurants. We rode from San Francisco to the border of Mexico, then we flew to New Orleans, took a bus to Tupelo, Mississippi, and rode north.

During the nine weeks that we traveled, our bikes were our homes — I rode a Bridgestone RB-T 21-speed that is the same age as I am. Our trip ended in Washington, DC, after 2,200 miles.

It didn't take very long on our bike tour before we settled into a regular routine. We quickly mastered the dance of taking the tent down together every morning. I boiled the water while Danny got out the oatmeal, raisins, and sugar. I bunged my sleeping bag and pad to my bike in the exact same place everyday, in the exact same way.

For nine weeks straight I could almost always reach out and touch Danny. We typically pedaled for about eight hours a day, covering roughly 65 miles. We talked about everything — our grandparents, our best friends, our family vacations, our future predictions — whatever came to mind. Bicycling was the perfect speed of travel; slow enough to notice how people decorate their front yards but fast enough to see multiple towns in one day.

I spent days imagining what it would look like before reaching Tennessee. Would it be lush and green or dry and brown? Would people have thick accents? Would it be crowded or desolate?

When we finally crossed the state line, we found old tobacco barns nestled in green countryside as well as pitbull terriers that seemingly wanted to kill us. We noticed that campgrounds were scarce. As we asked around, we discovered that Tennessee has a number of communes where we could stay because of long growing seasons and cheap land. One day, we arrived at Short

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Mountain Farms, a commune for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

When we pedaled into the Short Mountain Farms driveway, nobody was expecting us or knew who we were. We belonged to the steady stream of guests who regularly pour in and out. Anyone can come for a night, and some never leave. There is no discrimination over who can stay there. Residents range in age from their 20s to their 60s.

While we were there, some residents worked tirelessly in the garden, others lounged lazily on the porch soaking up the heat, and still others sat around a table in various costumes playing Settlers of Catan, a multiplayer board game where players assume the roles of settlers, each attempting to build and develop holdings while trading and acquiring resources.

The property included a main house with a large kitchen, a garden, a variety of other houses and shacks, a gazebo, a beautiful outhouse, and separate areas for hammocks, tents, and campfires. We met a professor of theater who taught at the local college and who entertained us with story after entertaining story. Unlike him, a number of Short Mountain Farm residents were unemployed, so everyone pooled their limited resources into the community.

The night we arrived, we ate organic pizzas using many ingredients straight from the garden. Everyone reached out to us, offered us a place to sleep, and asked us about our trip. The more time I spent at Short Mountain Farms, the more friends I made. Our time there was an amazingly satisfying experience.

While traveling by bicycle, nearly everyone talked to me. It was the closest I have ever come to being famous. When people saw my sleeping bag, tent, sleeping pad, and even my freshly washed underwear bungee'd to the back of my bike, they couldn't help but wander over to ask, "Where ya comin' from?"

"Oh, Mississippi," I casually said during the eastern leg of the trip, like

it was no big deal that I'd spent the last 10 to 15 days exerting myself all day in a 100 degree heat index; that I'd been crouching behind highway guardrails to pee and refilling water bottles with rubbery-tasting hose water.

I selfishly relished the moment after I said I rode from Mississippi because I could see complete strangers become proud of me. To someone who hoisted themselves out of an air-conditioned car to walk into the air-conditioned gas station, bicycling uphill through heat warnings sounded insane. It was insane. Yet, somehow, it made me an instantly impressive college student.

Some people broke into applause when they heard that we started this leg of our tour in Mississippi. Others removed their hats and gave a little bow. People took pictures of us and with us (Some even tried to sell them to us later!) Kids said they wanted to be like us. One man brushed the dirt off my tires, yelled "Damn girl!," and just walked away. However, the most common reaction was for people to say, "I couldn't do that," and shake their heads. And sometimes, they'd start talking about the weight they were trying to lose. Regardless of their reactions, it gave us a couple of minutes of conversation with them, essentially tiny glimpses into their lives.


To say that we experienced incredible acts of kindness and generosity is an understatement. Gas-station employees jogged over to their sink to diligently fill our water bottles with the coldest water they could produce. Retirees disappeared into their RVs and brought back buckets of ice. Grocery-store owners declared that all our food would only cost us \$10. These people believed in us, they wanted us to succeed. And they all mostly wanted us to be safe, often ending our conversation with, "Be careful out there."

Sometimes these interactions left me thinking "Whaaat?!!!" Sometimes I nodded and smiled for three minutes straight without being able to understand much through their thick local accents.

One particularly hilarious encounter happened when a man asked, "Do you need pear?" We thought he was offering us fruit but he was actually asking if we needed power to charge our mobile phones!

But many times, I would learn a thing or two during our brief roadside conversations, things I would probably not have learned otherwise. The long list includes things like why duck hunters are so passionate about duck hunting, how to stuff and preserve a deer, a new word for toilet, why firefighters get hurt while descending fire poles, strategies for open relationships, the attributes of fried pickles, the origins of bluegrass, the challenges of taking in foster children, the minerals of North Carolina, how to make gourd lamps, what the process is for selecting a Mardi Gras ball queen, the accomplishments of President James K. Polk, and condor mating patterns.

Our bike routes took us through places we didn't even know existed, like Flynn, Virginia, where old folks rule the nightlife scene playing bluegrass and dancing. We stumbled into a Civil War battle reenactment, were asked to add a wish to a Japanese wishing tree, and we rejoiced over discovering it's possible to poach an egg in chili or to use our sleeping pads to float on the Tennessee River.

In 2,200 miles, we met Americans of all stripes. We met die-hard liberals and people who told us that President Obama is the worst President we've ever elected. We met freegans (people who attempt to live an ethical lifestyle by reusing trash), couples who had retired to their RVs, extreme Lakers fans, midwives, and recent immigrants. It didn't matter who they were, where they were from, or what they believed — for that brief time — we were all on the same team. 

Bianca Giaever is a filmmaker, radio producer, writer, and bicycle enthusiast living in Brooklyn, New York. She graduated from Middlebury College in 2012 and majored in storytelling. For more information, visit biancagiaevers.com.