

# CITY KIDS TACKLE A “BIG RIDE”

by Susan Weaver

## Trip is full of first-time adventures for the Pittsburgh Nine



Chances are Anthony Pipkin was the only assistant principal in the country last year to put a stationary bike in his office and have students pedal it while he did paperwork and took phone calls. These kids from a Pittsburgh public school called Helen S. Faison Arts Academy weren't in trouble. They had been chosen to participate in the Greenway Sojourn, a mass ride that would take 500 cyclists from 34 states off-road from Washington, DC, to Pittsburgh.

The eight-day ride would enter the city near their school. So the tour's organizers, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC), had offered to host 10 students, ages 10 and 11, and their mentors on the Sojourn's second half. The Faison group would camp out with the other riders and cycle about 100 miles on the Great Allegheny Passage — a rail-trail that runs from Cumberland, Maryland, to the Steel City.

The invitation came late in the school year. By the time Pipkin — or Mr. P., as the kids call him — had selected 10 fifth-graders from among 60 eager volunteers and gotten parents' permission, it was May. The Sojourn was at the end of June, and the kids had to be ready to pedal 30 miles a day — more than any of them had ever ridden before. Some worried they might not make it. “It's gonna be hard,” Johnny Spell said of the challenge.

Some didn't even have working bicycles. There would be organized training rides in June once the new bikes — promised as part of the invitation — arrived. But

**Morning ritual.** Bikes come off the truck and the kids are ready to roll.

Pipkin knew that wasn't enough. A cyclist himself, he quickly put the stationary bike in his office and brought kids in one by one during recess and some classes. They began riding 10 minutes apiece, gradually increasing to 45-minute sessions, a regime he kept up until the end of school.

Then, on June 13, RTC staff brought the new mountain bikes and joined the students for their first training ride. They were thrilled with the 21-speed, 20-inch-wheeled Treks and the promise that if they completed the Sojourn, they could keep the bikes. With coaching from Mr. P. and five members of the local Major Taylor Cycling Club (a national organization for African Americans), the kids pedaled several miles on Pittsburgh's Riverfront Trail.

Students and coaches squeezed in three more training rides, working up to a 15-miler. But would they be ready for back-to-back days on the Great Allegheny Passage?

Ready or not, early on June 27, five boys and four girls (one youngster had dropped out) boarded a bus with Mr. P. and the other coaches and headed to Maryland. There they joined up with Sojourn director Tom Sexton, who guided them through a warm-up day. They pedaled in Fort Frederick State Park on the C&O Canal Towpath. At the restored fort, they learned about the French and Indian

War, a conflict in which key battles had occurred in their hometown of Pittsburgh. As the weather turned hot and steamy, they did a 10-mile ride on the wooded and mercifully shady Western Maryland Rail Trail. Then, in the late afternoon, they bused to the campsite in Cumberland, where the towpath connects with the Great Allegheny Passage. All the other Sojourners had their tents up, and it was threatening rain. As the Faison crew found space for their tents, several people hurried over to aid the newcomers, helping them ease into the crowd of strangers.

Putting up a tent, it turned out, was easy, but for these preteens the portable toilets and especially the shower truck took getting used to. Although there were individual shower stalls, sharing the common dressing area with strange women and girls "felt a little weird," Jamie Fultz said later. "So I just didn't look at them."

The 10 p.m. quiet time was hard, too. After dinner in town and dancing in the street, the Faison fifth-graders were more keyed up than most Sojourners, who'd been riding for five days on the C&O. As the rest of the camp fell silent, the kids chattered in their sleeping bags. So Mr. P. marched them out of their tents away from other campers to let off steam. He reminded them that tents are not like their houses, in which walls muffle sounds.



The Sojourn's first campsite. Canal-side accommodations at Cumberland, Maryland.

### Rite of Passage

The big test came the next day. After a 16-mile excursion with other Sojourners on the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad — during which they smiled and waved to those who opted to pedal the adjacent trail — they set out from Frostburg, Maryland, on the Passage. Immediately they were climbing, and the rolling resistance of the crushed stone-surfaced rail-trail took noticeable effort. After a few miles, they cycled into the unlit Borden Tunnel. It was dark and disorienting. "Mr. P., I don't feel like I'm moving!" called Lafayette Goode. About then he crashed into the wall and fell off his bike. Pipkin walked with him to the end of the 945-foot tunnel while he got his bearings.

The Faison crew continued to ascend the lower elevations of Big Savage Mountain with sweeping views of hills and valleys before crossing the Mason-Dixon Line. Excited to pedal across the Maryland-Pennsylvania border, the youngsters high-fived and posed for pictures at the overlook. One of the Sojourn riders told them how two British surveyors — Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon — established the line in the 1760s at the order of the English king to resolve a border dispute between the two colonies.

In less than a mile, they entered Big Savage Tunnel. "Whoa, it feels like it's air-conditioned in here!" said Taymon Russell, and the words echoed. The old railroad tunnel, blasted 3,300 feet through the mountain in 1911, had been rebuilt for trail use — fortunately with electric lighting.

A short climb later, the kids were relieved to crest the Eastern Continental Divide, but the descent was gradual and they still had plenty of pedaling to do. The plan was for them to cycle 17 miles to lunch at Meyersdale, then continue to a fossil dig along the trail where a geologist was to help them look for fossils. Afterwards, they would cycle to Rockwood, where the special bus RTC had provided would take them to the campsite. It would be a 28½-mile day. Could they do it?

After lunch, they crossed the Salisbury Viaduct, which rises high above the valley, railroad, and highway below. At 1,908



JOSH HOOPER

Passage perk. Former rail bridges and viaducts are part of the fun.

feet in length, it's a dramatic perspective, and some had a long time to contemplate it while waiting for others in the group to catch up. Finally, they pedaled on. About 20 miles into the day's ride, Taylah Pipkin, on an uphill stretch, joked dramatically

about calling her mother to come get her. "Please, please, let this be the end of the hills! I'm gonna kiss the ground!"

They all kept cranking, and by mid-afternoon they met Jim Shaulis of the Pennsylvania Geological Survey. With his

hammer, they split open pieces of marine limestone that had been formed under the sea "over 300 million years ago," as he told them. They exclaimed over the revealed seashell fossils, tucking them like talismans in their fanny packs. Melajia Henderson held up a piece; it sparkled with calcite crystals in the sunlight. "The rocks have diamonds in them!" she breathed.

A few miles later, folks from Rockwood had a table beside the trail where they gave out coupons for free ice cream in town. Nobody fell asleep in their ice cream, but some were dozing as they rode the bus to camp.

### Rainy Night

A steady rain began during the bus ride and continued throughout the spaghetti dinner that luckily had been planned for indoors in tiny Confluence (pop. 800), which gets its name from the juncture of the Youghiogheny and Casselman rivers and Laurel Hill Creek. It was a wet place that night. Inside their tents, the kids entertained themselves telling ghost stories.

The next morning, the students broke

**December 26<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup>, 2008**  
**400 Miles ★ 6 Days**

---

**Accommodations ★ Meals ★ Sag Wagon ★ Commemorative T-shirt**

---

**Plan to be a part of our 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Ride!!**

This exciting six day bicycle trip tours through the mountains, deserts, and seacoast around San Diego! The daily average is 55 miles with one day of 100 miles.

---

[www.sandiegohostels.org](http://www.sandiegohostels.org)

**Red Ribbon**  
**RIDE**

**Join Us in the Fight against HIV/AIDS in Minnesota!**  
**July 17-20, 2008**  
[www.redribbonride.org](http://www.redribbonride.org)      **REGISTER TODAY!**

camp, every one in a bright T-shirt they'd made for the ride, with FAISON in an arch across the chest, the girls wearing their fashionably knotted at the waist in back. The youngsters donned thin, see-through ponchos and set off through Ohiopyle State Park with its rocky outcroppings and trailside waterfalls, the trail closely following the Yough River. Even on this drippy, overcast morning with fog rising from the river, they could hear rafters whooping it up in the whitewater. The Pittsburgh nine, wiry legs pumping in lycra shorts, were to ride 27 miles to lunch at Connellsville. The group rode in single file, staying closer together than the previous day at the urging of their leaders.

But the paceline approach was proving a point of contention. Some coaches preferred to keep everyone together so as not to lose anyone; others worried this approach was unsafe. The question was answered when two girls, Taylah Pipkin and petite Whitney Owens, collided with surprised shrieks and went down.

Neither seemed hurt, and after that,



**End-of-the-day reward.** Mr. P. (standing) and crew in the Yough River.

their leaders spread the kids out a bit. At the town of Ohiopyle they crossed a bridge, parked the bikes, and walked a side trail for a close look at the falls that cascade over an 18-foot drop in the Youghiogheny. The Faison youngsters clambered over the rocks on shore. They snapped pictures with their disposable cameras and clowned around as they posed with the falls in the

background. Then it was back to business on the bicycles with 16 miles still to go to Connellsville.

As they spun along, they talked quietly among themselves and with a few Sojourn dads and their sons who had joined the group. The kids worked together, warning if they were preparing to pass, and telling each other to "be strong" as the miles

stretched on. They discovered that energy surges and wanes, and how to cope. Tired, Whitney, who had ridden at the front of the girls' group the previous days, found herself lagging. "I worried I couldn't catch up," she recalled later, "so I rode with some of the slower kids and Mr. P. so I wouldn't get lost."

After a stop to tour a stained glass factory outside Connellsville, they arrived, among the last, at the playground lunch site. The kids devoured made-to-order sandwiches and wraps. Then — rebounding after their 27-mile morning — most of the kids hopped up to play on the merry-go-round before boarding the bus for the campground.

At Cedar Creek County Park, where the group campsites are right beside the Yough, the students set up their tents as if they'd been doing it all their lives. They changed into bathing suits and gleefully waded into the river — broad and peaceful now — that they'd traced all day on the trail.

**Last Day**

When the kids pedaled into McKeesport

TOM SEXTON

**Two Thumbs Up:**  
*Pedal Pioneers: A Guide to Bicycle Travel with Kids*

"Why would anyone in his or her right mind want to take a bunch of kids on a multi-day bicycle adventure?" begins Becky Douglas, the author and editor of *Pedal Pioneers: A Guide to Bicycle Travel with Kids*. "Why would you want to spend months preparing for a trip that requires you to take care of every nitty-gritty detail of bikes, bags, breakfasts, and bruises?" Not at a loss for answers, here is a manual published by Adventure Cycling Association that not only shares its own expertise in planning bike tours, but also draws on the oft-tested wisdom of dozens of leaders of youth bike trips, who are more than successful at it — they are passionate about it.

*Pedal Pioneers* focuses on tours for "youth who can operate their own bicycles." This thorough, well-organized, and thoughtful book addresses seem-

ingly everything from liability insurance to leadership style, from training programs to on-tour teaching moments, from community fundraising to camp cleanup chores. Even experienced cyclo-tourists and tour leaders are bound to find insights and alternatives they might not have otherwise considered.

So that you can easily add your own notes and reference material, *Pedal Pioneers* comes in a loose-leaf binder. Chapter and bold-faced topic headings and bulleted lists make it easy to find information. Examples and advice from kid-tour organizers support the how-to text and appear in little boxes to give multiple points of view and inspiration. Further resources are included within the chapters and in a robust appendix. Cartoon illustrations make turning the pages fun.

**Ride to support clean air, healthy lungs and a tobacco-free future!**  
**22nd Annual Emigrant Trails Bike Trek**



Come cycle the beautiful Napa Valley Wine Country. Enjoy 3 days of cycling and 2 nights camping at the Napa County Fairgrounds in Calistoga. Great fun! Great people! Great cause!

Full on-road support ♦ In-camp activities  
Catered meals ♦ Entertainment ♦ And more!



**September 5-7, 2008 (916)444-5900 Sign up today at [www.sacbreathe.org/trek](http://www.sacbreathe.org/trek)**

miss a mile. miss a lot.

**THE TOUR WANTS YOU!**

Plan your 2008 cycling schedule with South Dakota in mind! The 4th Annual Tour de Kota begins June 8th, 2008. For the latest tour updates check out [www.tourdekota.com](http://www.tourdekota.com)  
**DEADLINE TO REGISTER APRIL 15, 2008!**

**2008 OVERNIGHT COMMUNITIES**

- JUNE 8TH:.....Sioux Falls to Mitchell
- JUNE 9TH:.....Mitchell to Chamberlain
- JUNE 10TH:.....Chamberlain to Highmore
- JUNE 11TH: .....Highmore to Huron
- JUNE 12TH: .....Huron to Brookings
- JUNE 13TH: .....Brookings to Sioux Falls

REGISTER EARLY  
AND SAVE!

For more information  
visit [tourdekota.com](http://tourdekota.com)  
or call 605.331.2200



*Midwest Scenic Bicycle Tours*

Connecting with local communities and their cultures for a richer, more engaging experience.



**Tri-State Ride** - Challenge yourself with a ride through the beautiful bluff regions and Amish countryside of Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa in June

**Theater and Arts Tour** - Enjoy stellar theater, gifted artisans, and scenic rural roadways in Southwest Wisconsin in August or September

**Harvest Ride to the Island** - Celebrate the harvest with organic meals and farm tours along majestic Lake Michigan to Door County and Washington Island in Wisconsin in September

[www.midwestscenic.com](http://www.midwestscenic.com) [info@midwestscenic.com](mailto:info@midwestscenic.com) 1.800.675.2295 Ad Code ACAD

## Nuts & Bolts: How We Did It

The gently graded, traffic-free rail-trails that make up a good portion of its route have always attracted families with children to the Greenway Sojourn. Last year was the first time, though, that Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) undertook hosting a group of



students as guests. Father of two, tour director Tom Sexton was keen to share his love of trails and cycling with kids from the destination city of Pittsburgh who otherwise would not have participated. I was one of the RTC staffers who helped put the youth program together. Here are some key decisions we faced.

**Choosing the group.** We figured we could afford and manage a group of 10 youths and five mentors. Based, among other things, on knowledge of his 10-year-old son's abilities and interests, Sexton favored this age group as old enough to pedal their own bikes on the trail and to be enriched by the experience. Our office near Harrisburg was half a state away, so we needed to find a youth organization in Pittsburgh that could share the planning, chaperoning, and coaching. We had a valuable partner in RTC national board member Dr. Stephen Thomas, direc-

tor of the Center for Minority Health (CMH) in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Thomas – already involved with Adventure Cycling's Underground Railroad spur route – provided staff assistance to locate the right participant group. Thomas, like Sexton, saw the project as a way to bring diversity to the Great Allegheny Passage to promote active living among African Americans. CMH's project director Mario Browne found Faison Academy and assistant principal Anthony Pipkin, who enthusiastically pitched in to help his students succeed.

**Tailoring the ride to kids' abilities.** Had we been able to start the kids' training earlier, they would have been fit enough to ride the full 42 miles each day. But to provide a doable challenge, we planned on 25- to 30-mile days for the kids and coaches. We arranged for the same bus and driver that brought them from Pittsburgh to transport them at the end of each day's ride to the campsite. A 16-foot rental truck carried the group's bikes, camping gear, and luggage.

**Equipping the group.** We assumed correctly that most students would not have suitable bicycles, cycling clothing, or camping gear. REI, one of the Sojourn sponsors, lent the group rental tents, sleeping bags, and sleeping pads. Seeking discounts for bulk purchases, RTC bought each of the kids a pair of lycra cycling shorts, an inexpensive rain poncho, a ride shirt, a disposable camera, and a journal notebook. We obtained free helmets through the American

Trauma Society and Safe Kids USA. And we purchased the Trek mountain bikes at a 20 percent discount from a local bike shop.

**Funding the program.** A \$4,500 grant from the Heinz Endowments, arranged by Dr. Thomas, and a \$1,000 grant from the Jewish Healthcare Foundation – both Pittsburgh foundations – just about funded equipment purchases and bus/driver expenses. RTC provided free registration to the group of 15, which covered other ride costs.

**Coaching and mentoring.** The original plan was that the coach-chaperones would come from Faison, because they would know the students. That did not work out but, fortunately, the Center for Minority Health had ties with the local chapter of the Major Taylor Cycling Club. Five of their members – Bruce and Shelia Woods, Brian Funk, Holly Hudson, and Mary Lou White



– coached the kids on training rides and during the Sojourn, sharing their knowledge and love of cycling.

**Lessons learned.** The youth program was a huge success but it was also a learning experience. Doing it a second time would be easier, building on the partnerships we estab-

lished and what we learned. To others I suggest:



- Start early. We could have used a year and a half to accomplish what we tried to do in seven months.
- Consider involving the youths and their organization in generating funds. Had we recruited earlier, Faison would have been willing to help with fundraising projects.
- Establish leadership roles clearly among trip mentors. Plan how to handle the kids' differing cycling abilities. Dividing them into a couple of smaller groups, for example, instead of trying to keep them all together would have eliminated some of the waiting for slower riders. Read *Pedal Pioneers* for strategies on that topic and on conflict resolution because these issues will come up.
- Mainstream the kids. Other Sojourners welcomed the Faison group and were excited about this program. With more training, the students could have cycled the full daily mileage, giving them more chances to get to know other riders during the cycling day and enriching everyone's experience. And we could have cut the cost of retaining a bus and driver during the tour.

JOSH HOOPER

SUSAN WEAVER

SUSAN WEAVER

after their 22-mile morning, their eager eyes said everything. "We did it!" they exulted. They'd completed their part of the Sojourn, earning the right to keep their bicycles. "I never gave up!" said Devin Brown with a grin almost bigger than his slender face.

Whitney nodded. "Our coach, Mr. Bruce," she said, "told me he was really proud of me for doing that many miles!"

They were ready to celebrate at brunch. Inside the Palisades building beside the marina, music was playing and other Sojourners were dancing to "Y.M.C.A." Some of the Faison group joined the dancers, and others headed for the food, arranged like a buffet in a grand hotel.

After brunch, most of the kids boarded their bus to drive into Pittsburgh. Johnny Spell and Ronald Coker, however, still felt strong and wanted to join the nine-mile mass road ride into the city, intended to draw attention to the piece of the Passage still needing to be built downtown. Joined by two of the coaches, Bryan Funk and Bruce Woods, the two boys lined up with 480 other Sojourners behind the state police motorcycles. Engines revved and the cyclists moved out, up highway overpasses and along city streets. "It was hard because we had to go up a big hill," Johnny said afterward, "but somebody helped me shift my gears. It was exciting to ride in a huge group. There were all different kinds of bikers, and there were cars going by on the other side of the road and drivers calling 'Hi!'"

### Epilogue

After the Faison kids started sixth grade in September, the bike tour was still fresh in their memories. So was an unexpected commendation from the Pittsburgh City Council. On July 10, along with Mr. P. and their other coaches, the students were called to the front of the council room to hear a proclamation in their honor. As the Channel 21 camera rolled, Mr. P. and Ronald Coker spoke about the ride and thanked the council.

Later, remembering that evening, Devin Brown told of his heady feeling as "everybody kept on congratulating us."

Perhaps even more important than a commendation is what these students learned about themselves. "The bike ride

was hard, but you do it for yourself," remarked Alyson McAtee. "It's a goal you can accomplish, and it makes you feel really good when you're done."

Johnny Spell agreed. "I believed in myself that I was strong and could make

it," said Johnny. "Now I believe in myself that I can do other things." **AC**

*A regular contributor to Adventure Cyclist, Susan Weaver says that the best journeys are on two wheels, and often you find yourself along the way.*



**Co-Motion Nor'Wester**

RAMROD Death Ride Ride for the Roses  
STP Ride the Rockies Hottorn Hill BRAG PBP  
Tour de Tucson Hilly Hundred

**It really is about the bike**



When you're a mere mortal and you've just signed up for the ride of your life it does help to be on the right bicycle. The Co-Motion Nor'Wester; the right bike for the rest of us.



We'll build one for you Give us a call to chat about your new Co-Motion [www.co-motion.com](http://www.co-motion.com)  
1-866-282-6336