

Riding to Better Health

by Aaron Teasdale



Ginny Sullivan, Adventure Cycling's new routes coordinator, with Dr. Stephen Thomas in front of the CMH offices in Pittsburgh

The Center for Minority Health and Adventure Cycling have Captains Lewis and Clark to thank for one of the most innovative partnerships in cycling. Besides their many other achievements, the legendary explorers were the inspiration for a new kind of Adventure Cycling bicycle route — the heritage route. After the Lewis & Clark Bicycle Trail was completed in 2002, a survey of Adventure Cycling members and Board of Directors to deter-

mine the next heritage route produced a clear favorite: an Underground Railroad Bicycle Route. Not only was there potential to make the route quite extensive (always an important consideration), but it involved an important and inspiring, if painful, chapter in America's history. The route also had the potential to appeal to a segment of the population, African Americans, that has traditionally been underrepresented in cycling.

There was only one problem — the organization didn't exactly have the deepest ties to the African-American community. The one thing we do know, however, is bicycle travel; and the joy, relaxation, and good health it can bring to everyone, regardless of race or heritage. The question, then, was how to share this good message and promote this new route to the African-American community in an appropriate and credible way. Or as Jim Sayer,

Adventure Cycling's executive director, explains, "We wanted a real connection with the people that the Underground Railroad was all about."

Enter the Center for Minority Health (CMH), an innovative and award-winning program at the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. Founded in 1994, the CMH has a strong history of creating grassroots, community-based programs that promote healthy lifestyles to minorities. Rachel Gooen, Adventure Cycling's development coordinator at the time, gave the CMH a call in the winter of 2004 during the early planning stages of the route, to gauge their interest in the UGRR. The Director of the CMH, Dr. Stephen Thomas, liked the idea right away. "What a great kick-start to mobilize people to get physically active," he says of the route.

Dr. Thomas, a national leader in minority health research, was looking for historical and cultural connections to help promote healthier lifestyles to African Americans and had begun reaching out to the recreation community. An Underground Railroad Bicycle Route was just the kind of historical link he felt could work. And, as a member of the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy Board of Directors, he'd already observed that, "The cycling community was not as diverse as it could and should be."

Seeing the potential for a synergistic partnership, the two groups agreed to join forces in creating and promoting the route. Carla Majernik, head of Adventure Cycling's routes and mapping department, says, "It seemed an unlikely partnership, and yet it made sense to all of us — they're the perfect complement for us on this project."

The CMH's mission is simple: the elimination of racial and ethnic health disparities by 2010. Recognizing that preventable diseases take a greater toll statistically on minority populations (for example, African Americans are two- to three-times more likely to develop diabetes than whites and twice as likely to die from it) the CMH aims to help African Americans, and other minorities, live equally long and healthy lives. The CMH specifically targets, among

other preventable conditions, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and mental health — all conditions cycling can meliorate, if not outright prevent.

With a staff of seventeen project directors, researchers, and assistants, the CMH works within the academic commu-

Wall Street Journal, "Some people tell their barbers things they would never tell their doctor."

In the spring of 2004, Adventure Cycling and the Center for Minority Health signed a memorandum of understanding pledging to work together on the



Missoula visit. Dr. Thomas consults with the Adventure Cycling staff in 2005.

nity to advance research on minority health issues and, perhaps most importantly, has created a series of innovative community outreach campaigns in the greater Pittsburgh area. They have separate programs to promote child immunization and quitting smoking, while another creates health education programming for local television stations. They even bring health screenings to neighborhood churches for Health Promotion Sundays.

Perhaps their most creative program is the Healthy Black Family Project, which provides health coaches, nutrition education, exercise classes, and even tai chi and yoga, in African-American neighborhoods. With over 3,000 participants, there is no cost to join thanks to a \$1,400,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Pittsburgh Foundation, the DSF Charitable Trust, the Highmark Foundation, and the Poise Foundation. Recognizing the importance of local barber shops as community hubs, the project trains barbers and beauticians as Lay Health Advocates to spread the word about disease prevention and healthy lifestyles. As Dr. Thomas recently told the

UGRR. Since then, the Center has introduced Adventure Cycling to civil rights organizations that will soon be joining a UGRR Advisory Board and helped secure endorsements from national health organizations. For example, the American Association for Health Education's President Randall Cottrell wrote in his letter of endorsement, "Importantly, this project presents an opportunity to heal emotional and psychological wounds from the past, and exemplify the triumphs and bravery of Americans — both black and white — who risked their own safety for the freedom of others."

As Ginny Sullivan, Adventure Cycling's new routes coordinator, puts it, "They've helped us access the right people." They're also the on-the-ground presence that ACA needs to reach out to African Americans. "They're the link to the community," says Majernik.

"The Center guides us along," says Sullivan. "They're helping us make sure we go about this the right way."

Since partnering with Adventure Cycling, the CMH has started a Major Taylor Cycling Club in Pittsburgh, named

for Marshall Taylor, the world-champion African-American bike racer of the early twentieth century. With the club and its Major Taylor connection, Dr. Thomas says, "We found a culturally relevant way of bringing cycling into the African-American experience." He also points out, that the club, like the UGRR, is open to everyone regardless of race. "Now we've got white cyclists joining the club," he says. "So it's bringing people of different racial backgrounds together around

cycling — that's what we want to see."

In late 2004, Dr. Thomas made a visit to Adventure Cycling headquarters where he made a presentation to the staff and learned of another, even earlier historical African-American connection to cycling — the United States Army's Bicycle Corps, who rode bikes 2,000 miles from Missoula, Montana, to St. Louis, Missouri, in 1897. Now he's fond of telling people that, "Throughout history, black people have used bicycles as a mode

of transportation."

Calling the UGRR "a joint project of national significance," Dr. Thomas says, "Historically, the Underground Railroad was a beacon of hope and a beacon of freedom with signposts along the way — we want to recreate that with signposts that say finish school, reduce stress, live a healthy lifestyle. We've reframed the whole concept of escaping to freedom in a new context of disease prevention and health improvement."

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While "fitness" and "self-discovery" are basic tenets of Adventure Cycling's mission statement (which reads: Our mission is to inspire people of all ages to travel by bicycle. We help cyclists explore the landscapes and history of America for fitness, fun, and self-discover), the partnership with the CMH is clearly a groundbreaking one. As Sayer puts it, "This is the first time we've done a route that was more than just a route — it's a community-based effort to try to reach people that aren't necessarily cyclists. It's exciting to be growing the bicycling community."

Dr. Thomas says, "Who could have imagined that cycling could bring us all together as one nation. We're so polarized. Here is a route that touches a nerve and history that is not pleasant to think about, but it also captures the spirit of the people who made their way to freedom and the white people who helped them. What a tremendous way of healing."

Besides the assistance and credibility the CMH is lending Adventure Cycling, it's clear that we're rubbing off on them too. Dr. Thomas says, "Hanging out with you guys is getting me on the bike more. When Ginny Sullivan came here several staff got out on bikes — now we've started using the bikeways here in Pittsburgh."

Even before the route is completed, the partnership is attracting new cyclists. A Program Director at the CMH, Mario Browne, has also picked up cycling, coordinates the Major Taylor Cycling Club, and will be joining Adventure Cycling's new C&O trip this spring. (Browne will also be speaking at our Birthday Bash in Brunswick, Maryland, on May 7) Thanks to Adventure Cycling and the CMH's partnership, Browne and Dr. Thomas are only the first of many new cyclists who will learn to experience the joys and health benefits of bicycle travel.

Before connecting with Adventure Cycling, Dr. Thomas admits, "I was like a lot of people — I had a bike sitting in the garage. Now, I'm actually using it." **AC**

To learn more about the Center for Minority Health, visit their website at www.cmb.pitt.edu. Maps for the southern portion of the UGRR will be released in July of 2006, with maps for the northern portion due out in early 2007.

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