THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

With a little help from my friends By Tim Cigelske

The day I lost my job remains a vivid memory: People in suits showed up in our office and read an official memorandum that my entire department was being eliminated. I remember that I couldn't stop shaking as I tried to wrap my mind around not having a job or a paycheck. It didn't seem real. But then there was another emotion that rose up almost at the same time. It felt like relief. Suddenly all the deadlines piling up were meaningless.

I never had to come into the office again.

The mixture of fear and freedom was like walking out of my final class of college. Now I could finally take the bike trip of my daydreams.

Except without a job, I'd need a little help from friends — or complete strangers. I would have to rely on the kindness of others. I just had no idea how much people I'd never met before would actually help me once I was on the road.

To get started, I chose my route based on practicality. I decided to ride 1,200 miles back to my house in Milwaukee after carpooling to Denver for a bachelor party. Despite a distinct lack of population centers, I found places to stay along the route on websites like Couchsurfing. com and Warmshowers.org, which are essentially social networking sites for travelers. Both offer free places to crash if you don't mind a stranger's floor, couch, or spare bedroom — and you reciprocate when others need your couch or floor.

Then, more connections appeared. A former boss had a cousin in Grant, Nebraska. An acquaintance had a brother in Lincoln. My wife had distant relatives in Des Moines, Iowa.

Local bike shops kicked in with sponsorships including a tune-up, new gloves, a rim, and the all-important

butt balm. Chipotle sent me a jersey and shorts, and offered free burritos. A friend let me borrow her GPS unit.

I was as ready as I'd ever be, so I

My first stop was Greeley,

Colorado, where I crashed with a group of college kids who cooked me a German feast that I demolished in my ravenous hunger. After dinner, we visited around a campfire while someone played tunes on an acoustic guitar. As I crept out early the next morning, I left a note saying

they set the bar high for the rest of the trip. In Iowa I stayed with a family I had contacted through Warmshowers. I met-Dan Beamon at his place of work and we rode together to his house. He had told me to find him by asking anyone in town for the "jeweler with the bow tie." Led me right to him.

Despite being a strict Baptist who didn't drink, Dan cheerfully took me to the local liquor store so I could pick out some beer to go with their homemade dinner. He took the next day off work, woke up early, and showed me his own bike-friendly route to the next town.

I still stay in touch with him on Facebook, and

later I asked him why he was so hospitable to me — a sweaty, smelly, beerdrinking stranger.

"That's what Warmshowers is all about," he said. "It's meeting strangers on bikes. It's sharing adventure stories and life stories. What better way to do that than around a meal or from the seat

Dan told me his family had hosted Warmshowers travelers for the last four years and had recently taken another couple out to breakfast. And when he took a trip from Iowa to New Orleans, he stayed with Warmshowers hosts five

"Yes, it can be a money saver," he said. "But the biggest thing is the people you meet. I'm sure you realized that. The photos one takes are of the scenery, but the stories are about people."

Other days passed in similar fashion.



strangers who opened up their homes and treated me like a long-lost friend. My biggest battles were with boredom through endless stretches of barren plains, a heat index that peaked at 113 degrees, and a few flats. Then I showed up in Kearney, Nebraska, with no place

I was hoping to stay at the local university, but I was told all the dorms were closed. As a back-up, I called around and found a cheap motel 15 miles outside of town. It was already dark, but I didn't have much of a choice. I made one last stop for ice cream. That's where I met Maury, Jeanne, and their dog Muffin.

With my spandex and loaded touring bike, I stood out, and they were curious about what I was doing. When I told them my plans, Maury warned that I didn't want to ride that stretch of highway at night. They offered me a place to stay and I happily accepted. They also took me grocery shopping, fed me pizza, loaded me up with fruits and veggies, and gave me a neckband to help keep me cool.

I know I'm not the only person on a bike trip that's enjoyed these types of experiences. Cyclists seem to receive a lion's share of kindness from strangers.

"I can tell you from personal experience that receiving aid while on a bicycle journey is highly likely," said Keith Andrews, who has traversed the country by both bicycle and motorcycle. He's been offered meals and places to stay while cycling more times than he can count, but not any of note while on his motorcycle.

"Religious groups were the most likely to aid us, but fellow cyclists also helped," he said. "Financial wealth did not seem to be a barrier to aid."

Steven Givler found that this hospitality toward cyclists is universal. In 1988, he spent three months cycling across Egypt hopping from oasis to oasis in the Sahara Desert. At the time, those oases weren't connected by roads and many didn't even have telephone lines. All Givler had to guide him was a compass and a map that proved less than accurate.

"I didn't realize that until too late, and I lost my way," he said. "While I made camp after my third day, I had no food and very little water, I decided that the next day I would head east in the hopes

of reaching the population belt along the

When he woke the next morning, he found himself surrounded by a band of Bedouins. Lucky for him.

"Contrary to what everyone had led me to expect, they were gracious and hospitable," he remembers. "They not only pointed me in the right direction, but gave me the best meal of my life."

Such stories could fill volumes of books. I'm sure you have your own tales

The story I'll tell my grandkids started outside Omaha.

I was almost to my destination when I peeked behind me and saw — to my shock and dismay — that one of my panniers was missing. It contained my food, my GPS unit, my wallet with my ID and money, and even my underwear. I was in

I called my host, Brian Nimmo, in a panic. We had never met before but he and his wife offered to host me after I contacted him through Warmshowers. He picked me up and happily drove me back

along my route, but the bag was nowhere

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll just become an emergency sponsor of your trip."

True to his word, he took the next day off from work and bought me new gear to replace what I had lost — much better than the cheap stuff I started with. He then drove me across a bridge busy with automobile traffic and dropped me off. Before he left, he gave me \$200 in cash to get home.

If it wasn't for the kindness of strangers, I wouldn't have been able to even start this trip. Without the kindness of this one person, I wouldn't have been able to make it back home.

Hardly a day goes by where I'm not reminded of the four words Brian told me as I pedaled away from Omaha.

"Just pay it forward," he said. Someone has to continue the cycle.

Tim Cigelske lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he bikes the Oak Leaf Trail to and from work every day. He often writes about the intersection of craft beer and a healthy, active lifestyle. Follow him on Twitter @TheBeerRunner.

