

Change Agent

**Joe Gagnon
changes lives
through example
— two-wheeled
example**

by Dan D'Ambrosio

Joe Gagnon lives the high-performance life, which he shortens to THPL on his Tumblr blog of the same name. Who else lives THPL? Well, Navy Seals for one.

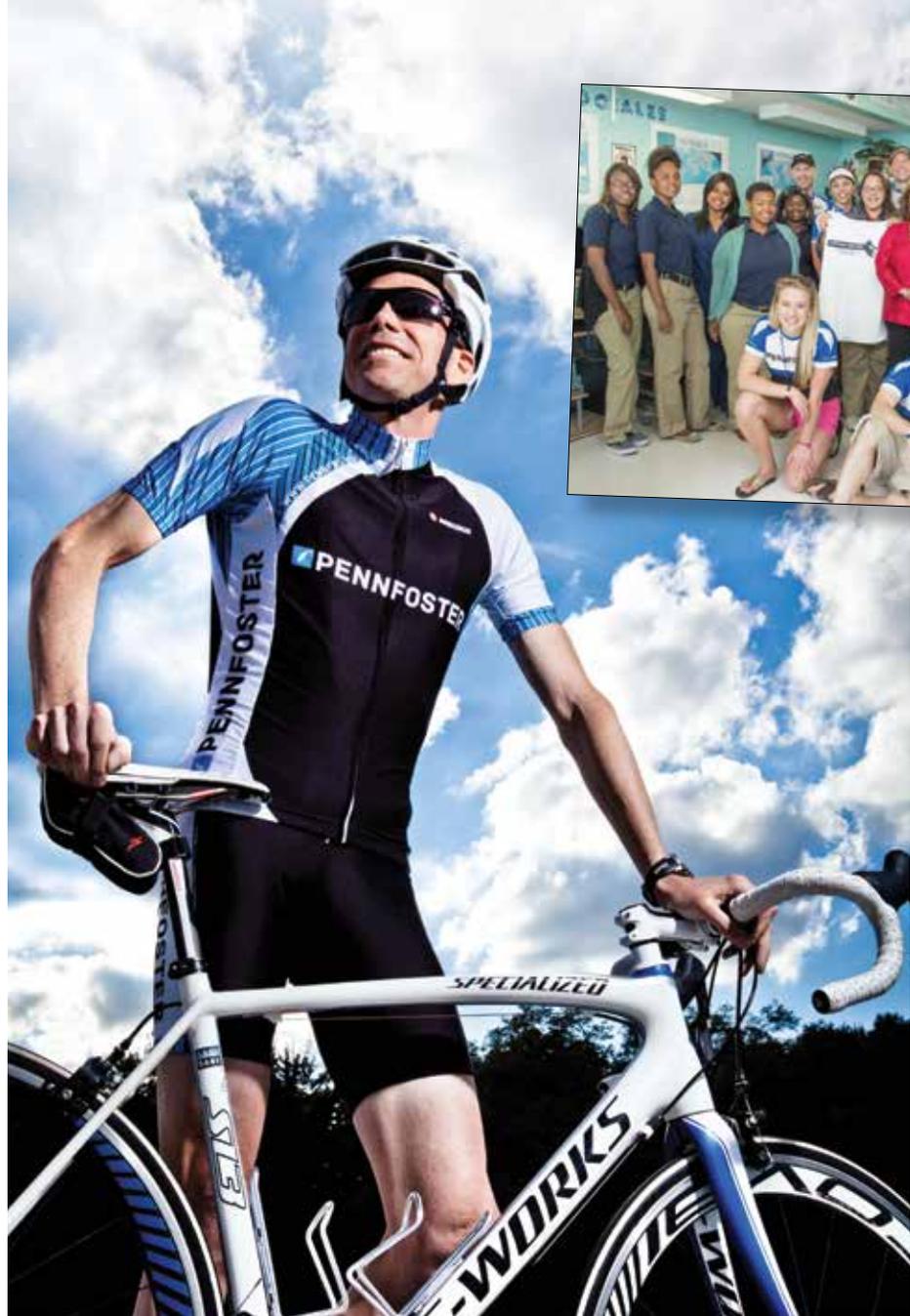
“When we think about a role model for THPL and how to think, behave, and live it, for sure, it would be the Navy Seals. They live to the standards we write about in the blog and the way we challenge ourselves to live,” Gagnon writes.

Which is not to say you have to be combat-ready to live THPL. As Gagnon writes elsewhere on his blog, THPL is an approach to life that pushes the envelope, tries new things, and takes chances — like the marathon Gagnon ran in January in Charleston, South Carolina, in a “respectable time” of three hours and 28 minutes, the first of 12 marathons he plans to run in 2014, including the Boston Marathon.

Or the eight bicycle tours he’s done in Europe, riding the Alps, Dolomites and Pyrenees.

“On this biking thing, I started to become passionate about it,” Gagnon said in an interview with *Adventure Cyclist*. “I’m a very goal-oriented guy.”

That explains the approximately 110,000 miles he has ridden over the past 11 years, including three years in



Penn Foster President Joe Gagnon travels by bike to meet with students around the country. Inset: Gagnon and the bike tour team from Penn Foster meet with students, faculty, and administrators from Job Corps in Homestead, Florida.

a row of riding 15,000 miles, which averages out to about 50 miles a day. Or the 230 miles he rode last year on June 21, the longest day of the year, riding 17 straight hours trying — and not quite making it — to ride from Pittsburgh to Washington, DC.

“And so it is, we bring to life the ‘Dream It, Plan It, Practice It, and Do It’ mantra. I trust the same is being played out for other members of our community. If not, you can just consider this a mild nudge to get those goals worked out and on track. You will be happy for having done that after they

are completed (as I am for getting marathon one done!),” Gagnon writes on his blog.

From coal mines to college degrees

THPL is not a bad philosophy to have when you’re president and chief operating officer of an online school that offers high school diplomas, vocational training, and associate and bachelor’s college degrees to students looking to improve their lives.

Penn Foster, in Scranton, Pennsylvania, began in 1890 following a terrible coal mining accident in which about



a dozen coal miners died. Scranton was built on coal, sitting as it did on one of the largest deposits of anthracite coal in the world.

Thomas Foster, the founder of Penn Foster, was a newspaper publisher who knew the accident that took so many lives might have been avoided if safe mining practices had been followed. He started Penn Foster to spread the knowledge of those practices far and wide through

what was one of the first correspondence schools in the country.

Today, 124 years later, Penn Foster serves a much broader audience. The school has about 150,000 active students, 95 percent of them in the U.S., and graduates “somewhere north” of 25,000 to 30,000 students every year across its different programs, Gagnon said. He estimates Penn Foster has educated about 13 million students.

“Our student population is the non-traditional student, someone who might be considered at risk. The existing education system has failed them, or they’re looking for an education to improve their economic opportunity,” he said.

Gagnon himself doesn’t fit that profile, having risen to become a partner at Ernst & Young, now known simply as EY, and running IBM’s retail business for five years. Gagnon was hired at Penn Foster about two and a half years ago to take the school from paper into the digital world, a long-overdue transition.

“We would send out printed study guides that would be the companion to a textbook,” Gagnon said. “We’ve now moved to make them all digital. We used to have you mail tests back and forth. Now all the tests are online. We created a student community that works just like Facebook. 70,000 students use it to make connections with each other, create virtual study groups, and ask questions.”

Bringing it together

Gagnon, 53, started riding when he was 39, two-thirds of the way, he said, into a career that was way too focused

on work. He started with rides around the neighborhood, but then signed up for a four-day charity ride in North Carolina to raise money for the fight against AIDS.

“I struggled through the 340 miles but raised \$50,000 for AIDS research,” he said. “It was a blast.”

Cycling brought a simple but powerful revelation for Gagnon. If you don’t take care of your physical body and feed your soul, they decay without notice. All work and no play makes Joe a dull boy.

“I believe that few take the view we have a multi-dimensional life,” Gagnon said. “My thesis is that physical fitness, mental toughness, and creative problem solving make you more effective. Body, mind, and soul come together for a more fulfilled life.”

In September 2012, Gagnon took his first listening tour to meet Penn Foster students, bringing together the various elements of his worldview and putting them into action. Gagnon and several of his staff members rode 300 miles over three days from Scranton to Brooklyn, New York, with stops in Allentown, Philadelphia, Trenton, and Newark.

“There were parts of the trip that were certainly quite industrial and parts that were really rural,” he said. “You really felt like you saw America.”

Gagnon and his crew made six stops in six locations over the three days, meeting Penn Foster students at every stop.

“The concept here was this idea that I had to get to know the students better, and also give them the sense that we’re serious about thinking differently about them and their relationship to the school,” Gagnon said.

Showing up at student meetings in bike gear and baseball cap also served to “humanize what could have been intimidating.”

“It allowed me to connect with them differently on the way you have to put effort and purpose into life, and when you do that, good outcomes come,” Gagnon said. “We’re not all about talk. We’re about doing and executing.”

Part reunion, part revival

Gagnon says that first tour was filled with joy and inspiration. Some students drove for hours to meet with him and

his riding companions. There could be 10 students at a meeting or 30 or 40, a total of about 150 students over the three days.

He described the tour as the intersection of a reunion, a revival, and a study group that sometimes met in a library, sometimes in a schoolhouse, and sometimes at Panera Bread — anywhere people were supportive of what he was doing and would let him meet with his students.

“What do they need? What do they want?” Gagnon asked of his students. “It was quite a remarkable experience, no question. Very moving.”

Last April, Gagnon and his team repeated the experience, riding in Florida from South Miami to Orlando, making stops along the way. He is still working on plans for this year’s tour, which will probably be in North Carolina, Texas, or California.

And there’s no end in sight.

“I don’t know why we would stop,” Gagnon said. “The intrigue of life is the gap between aspiration — what we know we should be — and the reality of how we live. The challenge is: How do we get to a place where we feel fulfilled? I’m not better than anyone else. I just want to take as much of the soul, mind, and heart I have and use it the best way I know how.”

Nicola Stewart, an admissions counselor at Penn Foster for a little over a year, has not accompanied Gagnon on one of his bike tours, but she has seen the effect they have had on students and on the school.

“The bike tours have given him a way of reaching students on a personal level, focused on physical fitness,” she said. “Going through this process online, the school can feel cold and impersonal.”

When students understand the sheer physical effort Gagnon has made just to see them, it makes them feel special.

“It’s a really great thing we’re doing, and I want more people to know about the school and about having other options,” Stewart said. “People feel caught or trapped. Reaching out to as many as we can, helping as many as we can — I want to be the best at that, and I know working with Joe, he is the symbol of that.” **AC**

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