On May 6, 2012, Dr. Gary Holdiness, 54, swung a leg over his Pinarello Prince bicycle and left his home in Kosciusko, Mississippi, for a ride in the nearby Natchez Trace Parkway National Park. The weather was sunny and dry, just the kind of beautiful spring day when the deeply religious Holdiness told his wife Donna he could see the “fingerprints of God.”

“Gary would do it on the Trace,” Donna Holdiness said. “He would say, ‘I saw a white crane in a flock of gray cranes standing there beautiful like Christ in all the grass.’ That’s what the Lord says, ‘My fingerprints are on everything. Open your eyes to see me.’ Gary did it so well.”

Noting that Holdiness was an experienced cyclist, using “clip-in style shoes and pedals” on his bicycle, the investigated driver was a minor at the time of the accident. The speed limit on the Parkway is 50 MPH and denied being on his phone or texting while driving.

driver was “actively texting during the minutes prior to the crash,” according to BreezyNews.com, the local news source. As a condition of his probation, the driver, who was a minor at the time of the accident, is required to take part in a series of public service announcements concerning safe driving on the Parkway.

In April, another bicyclist was killed on the Natchez Trace Parkway, the second in less than a year. 52-year-old Claude Gunter of the aftermath at Ole Miss. Gunter said he has put more than 16,000 miles on his LifeLine bike, and just picked up a Wilier, an Italian frame.

“Gary broke the mold on all that. He would have had all of us cycling.” When Gunter was having trouble with arthritis in his knee three years ago, Holdiness told him he could give him a shot for the pain, but a bicycle would heal his knee. With the encouragement of another friend who was one of Holdiness’s converts, Gunter started off on a spinning bike.

“We got the knee cleared up in about three weeks,” he said. From there Gunter discovered the pleasures of the open road and particularly of the nearby Natchez Trace.

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In April, another bicyclist was killed on the Natchez Trace Parkway, the second in less than a year. 52-year-old George Wimberly of Bay Minette, Alabama, was riding near milepost 77 when he was struck by the driver of a Nissan Versa.

Holdiness was hit near milepost 156. “The death of Dr. Holdiness left the little town of Kosciusko stunned. Like most small-town doctors, Holdiness was held in high regard by his colleagues at the Kosciusko Medical Clinic.

“It was just a deep sadness,” remembered Claude Gunter of the aftermath of the accident. “In these little towns, people like Gary don’t get replaced, they really don’t. It has affected the whole community.”

Gunter, 61, owns a clothing and sports-wear store in Kosciusko, where he raised his family alongside Gary and Donna Holdiness and their two young boys. Gunter grew up playing basketball, football, and baseball, “all the small-town sports.”

Holdiness, said Gunter, specialized in patients with arthritis in his knee three years ago, Holdiness told him he could give him a shot for the pain, but a bicycle would heal his knee. With the encouragement of another friend who was one of Holdiness’s converts, Gunter started off on a spinning bike.

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clists who use the Trace every year, but he puts the number at between 500,000 and 1,000,000 cyclists a year, based on anecdotal evidence.

“We think we have a great resource that is a perfect venue for bicyclists, but we want to be sure we’re managing it in a way that ensures mixed use — motor vehicles, bicycles, and others,” Wilkerson said.

The Natchez Trace welcomed a new superintendent, Mary Risser, in January, but Wilkerson said last year he had already talked to her about the joint effort with Adventure Cycling and she was “excited about it.”

“I expect things to continue right on as normal after a pause for changing bosses to let everybody take a breath,” he said.

The agreement between Adventure Cycling and the Natchez Trace calls for a three-pronged plan of action. The first strategy will be to educate city officials, business owners, and residents in the gateway communities along the Trace about cycling.

Second, the plan calls for installing signs and “sharrows” along the Trace, including signage that say, “Cyclists May Use Full Lane,” which is the law in Mississippi. The sharrows — images of bicycles painted on the roadway — are planned for the center of each travel lane to communicate to drivers that cyclists are on the roadway.

The third strategy is to include educational materials about cycling in all of the Trace’s visitor centers. There may also be such efforts as a group of cyclists riding the entire 440-mile length of the Trace, hosting gateway community meetings. Perhaps they could also be joined by a local group of automobile enthusiasts.

Sullivan said some $17,000 had been raised by cyclists in the name of Dr. Holdiness, which his wife Donna asked to go toward making improvements on the parkway for cyclists, such as the ones being contemplated in the agreement between the Park Service and Adventure Cycling.

Gunter points out that cyclists must make sure they are visible in the darkening shadows cast across many sections of the tree-lined Trace.

“Plenty of drivers are conscientious and scared of hitting cyclists because there are so many shadows on the Trace,” Gunter said. “It’s a very big problem. Most local cyclists have lights.”

Holdiness was wearing a yellow jersey when he was hit and had lights on his bike, although there was no way for investigators to know whether those lights were on.

Donna Holdiness is trying to prepare herself for a meeting this year with the parents of the young man who killed her husband. They wrote a letter to her in June 2012 after the funeral in May, saying they knew the timing was not yet right but when she was ready they wanted to sit down and talk to her. “I have not contacted them,” Holdiness said. “I am waiting for the federal prosecutors to make that decision.”

And she has. But now she is determined to meet with the parents some time this year.

“I have to let them know that they are forgiven and I hold no malice,” Holdiness said.

Holdiness herself lost a 17-year-old son to a car accident. Her son Matthew was driving the car with four other boys in it. Three died and two lived.

“I went to every parent and faced them and said, ‘What can I do for you?’” she said.

The boy who hit Holdiness’s husband has not written to her. She doesn’t want a letter that someone else forces him to write.

Holdiness thinks back to the moment when she had to call her other son Samuel to tell him his father was dead. Samuel was in South Carolina with his wife Amber, working as a medical resident. Holdiness was at an Ole Miss baseball game. She runs the booster club for the baseball program at the university.

Fuller Smith, a young coach with Ole Miss, was with Holdiness and told her she had to call her son.

“I said, ‘Fuller, I can’t,’” Holdiness remembered. “He said, ‘I will dial the number.’ He handed me the phone and got down on his knees and started praying for the strength to tell my son his father was killed. It was the most amazing thing. I was calm, clear, and in control. I felt the arms of God almighty around me as that boy was on his knees praying strength for me.”

In July 2015, Samuel Holdiness will take his father’s place at the Kosciusko Medical Clinic.

Dan D’Ambrosio is a staff writer covering business for the Burlington Free Press in Burlington, Vermont.