



# ABBEY'S RIDE FOR LIFE

A father finds healing through a cross-country bike ride to listen to his daughter's heart beating in a new life

STORY BY  
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Six years ago, in January 2017, tragedy struck Bill Conner and his family. His two children, Abbey, 20, and Austin, 22, were vacationing at a five-star resort in Mexico when Abbey drowned after both brother and sister fell into one of the resort's pools.

"My kids were at the hotel less than two hours," Conner said. "They had a couple of shots of tequila and blacked out. My son fully recovered, but my daughter drowned."

Conner suspects tainted alcohol and is suing the resort.

"We're trying to get it over with," he said of the lawsuit. "I'd like to get it behind me."

In May 2017, four months after his daughter's death, Conner left his hometown of Oregon, Wisconsin, on a 2,600-mile ride to the hospital in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where his daughter had been on life support before dying as an organ donor. He called it Abbey's Ride for Life.

The ride honored Abbey's memory and drew attention to the four people whose lives she saved with her organs, including a young man in Louisiana who received Abbey's heart. Conner met with Loumonth Jack, Jr., on Father's Day and listened to his heart with a stethoscope Jack handed to him before they embraced.

"That hug has been seen over 200 million times," Conner said.

The Louisiana Organ Procurement Organization (LOPA), a nonprofit that coordinates organ donation in the state, set up the meeting between Conner and Jack.

“When we left there, David Muir put us on Friday night news and made Abbey Person of the Week,” Conner said, referring to ABC’s nightly news broadcast. “It just went viral.”

Conner said LOPA told him his story was recounted in 13 different languages on six different continents.

“It was the bike ride heard around the world,” Conner said.

Abbey’s Ride for Life also went viral on social media, and soon Conner was receiving supportive messages from parents and their children around the world. Inevitably, he also received a few hurtful messages.

“I had a couple of messages that said, ‘Hey, if you’re dumb enough to let your kids drink in Mexico, they deserved to die,’” Conner said.

Conner, 62, used portions of Adventure Cycling’s Great Rivers South and Southern Tier routes to help plan his two-month journey. With the help of a friend, Conner took about two weeks to plot out his route.

“I called Adventure Cycling and bought the maps I thought I needed and more,” Conner said. “We put the maps out and found our way.”

Conner rode alone, covering about 80 miles a day over the course of 52 days, finishing in early July.

“I didn’t ride seven days a week; I rode once or twice on a Saturday,” he said.

The ride began under difficult conditions.

“The weather in Wisconsin was terrible,” Conner said. “It was spring, it was raining, it was blowing.”

Like many long-distance cyclists, Conner got in shape as he rode. Early on, just outside of Platteville, Wisconsin, a hospital that had caught wind of Conner’s ride put him up for the night in a facility on the hospital property.

The next morning as he was leaving, Conner said something happened that confirmed for him he was doing exactly the right thing for himself and his daughter.

“This gentleman comes up to me and says, ‘Mr. Conner, can I talk to you for a minute?’” Conner remembered. “He goes, ‘I want to thank you for what you’re doing. My brother, if he hadn’t gotten an organ donor, would have died.’ That put me in the place of thinking Abbey and I are exactly where we belong.”

Conner had talked to both of his children about organ donation early on. He started by picking up garbage with them when they were still in elementary school.

“I would take them out into the community, and I would tell my kids our job where we live is to make it a better place to live every day,” Conner said. “We would walk around and fill garbage bags. We didn’t go home until they were filled. All of a sudden, the light bulb went on and both wanted to carry a garbage bag themselves.”

When Abbey was in third grade and Austin was in fifth grade, Conner began talking to them about organ donation and how it helps other people live when there’s a tragedy. He was surprised when, years later, both of his children informed him after they got their drivers’ licenses that they had become organ donors.

“I started crying,” Conner said. “They made the choice on their own.”

In addition to saving the lives of four people with her organs, Abbey restored sight to two people by donating her corneas. She also helped 31 burn victims and others by donating her skin.

As his ride gained momentum and publicity, Conner found himself the center of attention wherever he went.

“I’d be eating in restaurants and people would come over and give

## CONNER MET WITH LOUMONTH JACK, JR., ON FATHER’S DAY AND LISTENED TO HIS HEART WITH A STETHOSCOPE JACK HANDED TO HIM BEFORE THEY EMBRACED.



From left: Abbey Conner in high school; Bill Conner finishing his ride in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.



A volleyball fundraiser.

condolences,” Conner said. “In grocery stores, people would come up to me and say, ‘You’re Abbey’s dad.’ It was everywhere, no matter where I went.”

After the host of a local radio show in Louisiana who interviewed him posted Conner’s route online, Conner began hearing from people along the way who invited him to stay at their houses, insisting on feeding him as well.

Conner only had two flat tires during the ride. On two occasions, he also had dogs chase him. Trek sponsored the ride and told Conner that if he needed anything, all he had to do was visit any Trek shop along the way.

“For instance, my bike wasn’t shifting right,” Conner said. “I was in the middle of nowhere, but three miles away there was a Trek shop.”

The help Conner received wasn’t limited to Trek shops.

“Every time I needed something, some stranger would show up,” he said. “I had multiple people drive by me who knew who I was. They would pull over and wait for me to give me their condolences.”

Often these sympathetic strangers would ask for a photo with Conner to get the word out on their own social media channels and help with the cause of organ donation.

As he neared his destination in Fort Lauderdale, Broward Health Medical Center, Conner began picking up riders. By the time he reached Fort Lauderdale, Conner said he had 20 or 30 cyclists riding with him. Fort Lauderdale police escorted Conner through about 10 intersections leading up to the hospital, racing ahead to shut down the next intersection as he passed through the one they had just closed.

It made for an exciting entrance into town. Soon he had the mayor, Jack Seiler, riding next to him.

“People were running out of buildings to the street like the president was coming,” Conner said. “It was cool.”

As he neared the hospital, Conner wanted to ride by himself. His entourage fell back by about five minutes.

“We pulled in and then we had television stations covering us,” Conner said. “We had probably 100 people

waiting for us, so we rolled in. They just welcomed us.”

In a short ceremony, Mayor Seiler gave Conner the key to the city. Loumonth Jack, Jr., the recipient of Abbey’s heart, was there to greet Conner as well. Later, Conner learned just how much good his ride had done from the Louisiana Organ Procurement Organization.

“We generated with our bike ride over 60,000 new organ donor registrations,” Conner said. “By now we’ve done well over 80,000 new donor registrations.”

When you do the math, Conner said, up to 150,000 lives will be saved by the attention Abbey’s Ride for Life generated.

“We did exactly what we needed to do,” he said. **AC**

Dan D’Ambrosio is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist.

There are a number of places to easily register to become an organ donor. Find one that works for you or visit [registerme.org](http://registerme.org) today for an easy-to-complete form.