

--Guts, Grit &

SINCE BEING DIAGNOSED WITH MELANOMA AT AGE 24, J-SCHOOL GRADUATE ELIZABETH MCGOWAN HAS HIKED THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL, RIDDEN HER BICYCLE ACROSS THE UNITED STATES AND RAISED MONEY FOR CANCER RESEARCH. SHE PEDDLES A MESSAGE OF HOPE AND PERSEVERANCE.



Gumption

STORY BY ELIZABETH MCGOWAN, BJ '83



PHOTO COURTESY OF ELIZABETH MCGOWAN



PHOTO BY MARNY MALIN

WHEN I STOOD IN THE SHADOW of my dying father, I was only 14 and had no idea that the melanoma feasting on his body was evidently part of my own genetic makeup. Mine, it turned out, would remain dormant for 10 more years before appearing as a ragged-edge mole on my upper back. Whatever activated those malignant melanoma cells started a decade-long endurance test with cancer that later spread to my lymph system, lungs and liver. Yet I survived, and in spring 2000 I reached a turning point at last — cancer-free for five years. Cancer patients who survive that long without a recurrence are much less likely to experience one. To celebrate my clean bill of health, I embarked solo on a cross-country bicycle ride to raise money for cancer research and education.

In an odd way, cancer reminds me of the shock of falling off of a bicycle and slamming into the unforgiving asphalt. You can either lie there and wait for the oncoming semitrailer to turn you into roadkill, or you can get up, brush off, remount the bike and move on. I named my ride “Heals on Wheels” because it’s the most succinct way of describing my multidimensional mission. Although I’m certainly no “Lancette” Armstrong, I wanted to be a source of hope and prove that cancer doesn’t have to be a death sentence. I spread the word about the dan-

gers of melanoma with my own voice, sunscreen coupons and brochures. My ride also was a tribute to the care I received at Wisconsin’s Waukesha Memorial Hospital. But my most private and deeply felt reason for the ride was to honor the unfinished life of my father, Ronald Stuart McGowan, who died at age 44 in October 1976.

Although my father had melanoma for two decades, I remember exactly where I was when I first realized he was dying. It was the spring of 1976 — our nation’s bicentennial — and nobody in our family was much in the mood for celebrating. Pain was plentiful and sleep hard to come by. Somehow my mother managed to keep some semblance of order in our rambling 19th century Massachusetts farmhouse. While tending to four daughters and working a full-time museum job, she watched her partner of 22 years fade away. In between, she regularly drove two hours with my father in our station wagon to the hospital in Hanover, N.H.

The doctors at Dartmouth College offered the most progressive treatments available. But even advanced surgeries and chemical cocktails were torturous and frustratingly ineffective. In its most common form, melanoma is a skin cancer that appears as a dark blackish-bluish mole with uneven edges. At least then it’s visible to the naked eye and thus treatable. More frightening is when melanoma

Cross-country cyclist Elizabeth McGowan, left, pauses amid the aspens at an overlook in the Colorado Rockies’ Arapaho National Forest. This scene is near 11,542-foot Hoosier Pass, the highest point on the TransAmerica Bicycle Trail, which she traveled in 2000. The inset photo of Ronald and Susan McGowan with daughters, from left, Jennifer, Elizabeth, Carolyn and Gretchen, was taken at their Philadelphia home in the mid-1960s.



Above, McGowan starts her "Heals on Wheels" bicycle tour at the mouth of the Columbia River in Astoria, Ore., on a Trek hybrid bicycle loaded with almost 40 pounds of gear. Right, one of three Continental Divide passes along McGowan's route in the Yellowstone National Park section of Wyoming takes her 7,988 feet above sea level.

creeps along a more insidious route, multiplying its ugly and voracious cells by feeding on major organs and the circulatory system. Then, a biopsy or the sleuthing eye of an X-ray or scanning device is the

"Where has Daddy's cancer spread?"

Her whole body seemed to droop as he turned from the clothes to face me:

"Elizabeth, the cancer is in your father's brain. He's afraid to look at his body, for

freckled cheeks as I whipped down 11,542-foot Hoosier Pass in the Colorado Rockies at 40 mph. On my bicycle. "If I could be anywhere in the world right now," I asked myself as I zipped past aspens embellished with leaves the color of sunshine, "where would I want to be?"

"Right here," I answered without hesitating. "Right here."

Right here was the midpoint of my cross-country bicycle ride. The 4,250-mile odyssey from Astoria, Ore., to Yorktown, Va., was an undertaking in intestinal fortitude that I fondly refer to as cycle therapy.

With this adventure, which I nickname the "Guts, Grit and Gumption Tour," I was determined to strip away all the extraneous and complicating layers of life. That left just me, my resolve and the bicycle. I didn't need so much as a compass to point north. Lying in my tent on starry nights, I scanned the skies for the Little Dipper, then ran my eyes down her bent handle to find Polaris.

I HAD BEEN DIAGNOSED WITH MELANOMA at age 24 in 1985, just two years after graduating from J-School. Thus began rounds of immunotherapy, chemotherapy and multiple surgeries. In

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only way to find it. With surgery as their sole tool, doctors had managed to keep my father's melanoma in check for almost 20 years. They took a piece of him at a time.

On that April day in 1976, I approached my mother in the master bedroom where she was sorting clothes, and I lowered myself into the mottled green wing chair that my father's father, a retired college professor, had given to us. I stared west out the bay window, eyeing the expansive untilled plot where, in an ordinary spring, our vegetable garden would take root.

Nervously, I stroked the nubby fabric, calmed my voice and asked my mother,

fear he'll see it everywhere."

My eyes traveled to my father's polished, barely creased loafers under his chest of drawers. "Those loafers still have a lot of wear," was the bizarre, irrational thought my 14-year-old brain conjured up. It was one of those imaginary lifelines that drops like a rescue rope to the fearful. "My father can't die. He hasn't even worn out his shoes." Maybe it was just the small voice of hope, piping up in spite of the crush of despair.

That memory pierced my brain 24 years later in September 2000. Five years into the remission of my own cancer, purifying tears of joy and sorrow coated my



PHOTO BY MARNY MALIN



PHOTO COURTESY OF ELIZABETH MCGOWAN

Left, McGowan relies on plenty of snacks to fuel the climb to 9,658 feet at Togwotee Pass in Wyoming. Above, this megaball of barbed wire guides visitors to the Barbed Wire Museum in La Crosse, Kan.

the midst of those onerous treatments, I wondered which was worse: having a disease that would make me slowly waste away, or having poisons (ironically labeled “medicine”) dripped into my body that sapped me of energy, appetite and clarity of mind? Despite four vicious rounds of chemotherapy in 1989, small malignant tumors still clung to my lungs. I didn’t know how much time I had left on the planet, and I didn’t feel I had the luxury of waiting until retirement to pursue the proverbial “to do” list stuck to the refrigerator with a magnet.

So, I ditched a perfectly decent newspaper reporting job in Wisconsin, gave up my apartment, delivered my cat to a temporary home in New England, distributed my limited worldly possessions among friends, strapped 45 pounds of gear onto my back and walked all 2,167 miles of the Appalachian Trail. Starting at Springer Mountain in Georgia, I followed spring, summer and fall along the spine of the Appalachians, through 14 states to Mount Katahdin in Maine’s deepest reaches. I walked because I absolutely had to.

I figured if I couldn’t heal while drinking spring water, inhaling mountain air and walking 12 to 20 noodle, Pop Tart,

rice- and chocolate-powered miles a day, just how could I regain my health?

The outdoor therapy worked — for a while. Either that or the chemotherapy had a delayed healing response. X-rays taken in fall 1991 showed no lung tumors. One doctor, who could not explain my apparent recovery, sent me on my way with these words: “I don’t know exactly what you’re doing, but keep it up.”

A melanoma recurrence in 1994 took me to a precipice where I stared death straight in the eye. The only reason I’m around to recount that experience is because skillful surgeons opened up my midsection and carved out half of my liver.

I WAS DETERMINED TO STRIP AWAY ALL THE EXTRANEIOUS AND COMPLICATING LAYERS OF LIFE. THAT LEFT JUST ME, MY RESOLVE AND THE BICYCLE. I DIDN’T NEED SO MUCH AS A COMPASS TO POINT NORTH.

I had hiked the Appalachian Trail to cleanse my body of an invasive evil, not to outrun cancer or deny that I had it. I was learning how to forge ahead with a life that was not proceeding according to plan. I wasn’t desperate, but I had a sense of urgency. Although my bicycle odyssey, “Heals on Wheels,” wasn’t marked by the

same feelings of gravity, cancer (or a lack of it) was still the motivator. The way cancer had gnawed its way through my body, I figured I would be lucky to live four decades. My physical and mental struggles with cancer led me to believe that these healthy years I am fortunate to have are extra treats, like dessert — judiciously passed out and meant to be savored. Pass the pie!

A venture such as “Heals on Wheels” can either fall flat on its hopeful face or be injected with a life of its own. I like to think my trip did the latter. Not only did I far exceed my fund-raising goal, but I also made remarkable connections with people and landscapes.

When slashing rains in Oregon put puddles in my cycling shoes; when harsh headwinds in Kansas slowed my pace to an agonizing 5 mph; when Kentucky climbs had me cursing the Appalachians; I soothed my soul by reminding myself that none of these temporary situations could be as nasty as just one round of chemo-

McGowan's trek rolls to an end on the Atlantic Coast in Yorktown, Va., right. She took 79 days to pedal all 4,250 miles and 10 states of the TransAmerica Bicycle Trail, below.

therapy. "Mind believes, body achieves," I'd tell myself. Even though I was pedaling alone, I was carrying along an elaborate web of aspirations from supporters. After reading about my upcoming ride in a newspaper, a Wisconsin man who organizes an annual event for cancer survivors called to ask if he could link my electronic journal entries to his Web site. The site covered every aspect of melanoma, which killed his son at age 19. "People like us need to know someone like you is out there," he told me. "You're a hero to us."

I don't know about being a hero, but I do know that my 79-day journey through small towns and across this country's mountains, prairies, rivers, lakes, grasslands and deserts reinforced my faith in human beings. I found out that people want to be part of the greater good. Sometimes you have to be there to hold the door ajar.

My continental pilgrimage emphasized the value of a one-word mantra I've clung to all my life.

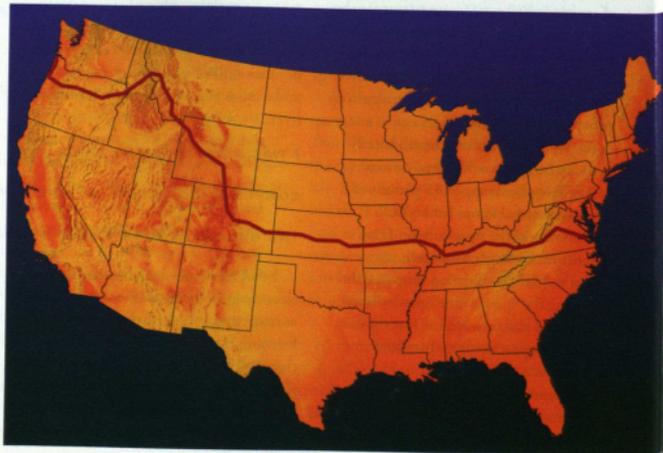
Persist. ☼

About the author: Elizabeth H. McGowan, BJ '83, is writing a book about "Heals on Wheels," her Aug. 16 to Nov. 2, 2000, solo cross-country bicycle trip from Astoria, Ore., to Yorktown, Va. She recently moved from Wisconsin to Washington, D.C., to take a job at the headquarters of The Nature Conservancy. Her ride raised \$12,000 for cancer research and education; access her archived journal entries from the trip at <http://www.waukeshamemorial.org>.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ELIZABETH MCGOWAN

MY 79-DAY JOURNEY THROUGH SMALL TOWNS AND ACROSS THIS COUNTRY'S MOUNTAINS, PRAIRIES, RIVERS, LAKES, GRASSLANDS AND DESERTS REINFORCED MY FAITH IN HUMAN BEINGS.



Cheers to Blue Valley

MY FRIEND JOANNE HAD ALREADY bicycled cross-country, but I was still skeptical when she warned me that, hands down, Missouri would issue the soundest spanking to my bicycling backside.

"Could that be true?" I wondered in July 2000 while studying a 10-state continental route. "Those profile maps of climbs in Idaho, Montana, Wyoming and Colorado looked much more daunting."

Three months later I realized that Joanne was right. Sure, autumn scenery in the Ozark Mountain towns of Yukon, Eunice, Summersville, Alley Spring and Eminence was stellar, but the roadways weaving these communities together were a series of hamstring hells. It was like riding a roller coaster — with your legs as the sole power source.

After pedaling 60-plus strenuous miles Monday, Oct. 9, I looked for a place to pitch my tent, eat and catch up on my journal before dark. Just when I was wondering whether I'd pushed my luck too far, I spied the Blue Valley Bar perched hard by the asphalt and encircled by half a dozen trailer homes. Hallelujah!

Inside, country music erupted from the jukebox. Over the strains of George Jones, I told my tale to Bob, a bartender with kind eyes. He was gracious enough to let me use the restroom and pitch my tent in the scrappy side yard.

Back inside on a bar stool, surveying my surroundings, I felt as though I'd entered the Cheers of the Ozarks. These self-described hillbillies told jokes, shot pool, downed beers and sucked on cigarettes. I sipped on iced tea to soothe my smoke-choked throat. When I figured I'd be dining on the only visible food — Slim Jims and peanuts — the woman next to me offered to fix burritos in a makeshift kitchen. Turns out she was the retired Blue Valley cook.

In between explaining the "Heals on Wheels" mission, laughing and dancing the two-step (in my cycling cleats!) with a customer celebrating his birthday, I listened to poignant stories about dreams, hopes and fears. A worker at the local scrap yard invited me to visit his wife, a cancer survivor, in their nearby trailer. Although they insisted I sleep on their couch, I reassured them I'd be plenty toasty in my tent. "If you don't see any movement in the morning, come thaw me with your hair dryer," I joked before heading out into below-freezing temperatures.

As I hunkered deep into my sleeping bag, I knew its synthetic lining wasn't the only source of warmth in Blue Valley. Strangers toting their own share of troubles in this hardscrabble region had welcomed me into their lives. Here, I found another point of connection on this magical journey. At dawn, I donned every layer of my clothing and brushed a crust of frost off my tent and panniers before rolling off to Pilot Knob for breakfast.

Months later, near Christmas 2000, I sent out hundreds of "Heals on Wheels" photo thank-you cards. Of course, the Blue Valley Bar was on the list. Having the scantiest address information, I mailed a card to "Bob the Bartender," using a ZIP code from the largest neighboring community — half expecting the U.S. Postal Service to return it.

Weeks later I received a handmade card emblazoned with a woman riding a bicycle. It was signed by "Bob the Bartender" and the whole slew of Blue Valley regulars. That one, no doubt, is a keeper. ☼

Regulars at the Blue Valley Bar (now the County Line Bar under new ownership) in Missouri's Ozarks — from left, Fred Hall, Oma Tolbert, Ervin Nash, "Bob the Bartender" Barton and Donnie Dunn — welcomed McGowan during an unforgettable "Heals on Wheels" October evening. They later sent McGowan a card, above right, congratulating her on her successful trip.



Cycling for cancer



PHOTO BY BOB HALL