



Long, winding road home, by bike, leads MacRae from Seattle to New Jersey

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By ROBERT KOPACZ

BERKELEY HEIGHTS -- Susan MacRae, a 1986 graduate of Governor Livingston High School, visited her hometown of Berkeley Heights often after leaving to pursue her studies and a career. What made September's visit different is the way she arrived.

Many longtime residents may remember Ms. MacRae from her days as a star athlete at Governor Livingston High School. Her record of accomplishments reads like that of an all-star: 1985 Union County Most Valuable Player in Outdoor Track and Field; Member of the 1985 Group II State Championship Team in Soccer; and selection to the Union County Basketball Coaches All Star Team in 1986, to name a few.

So profound was her impact on local high school sports, she was profiled in this newspaper's July 23, 1986, edition as one of the star athletes at Governor Livingston.

But this time, the journey toward the finish line mattered almost as much as getting there first.

On Sept. 9, 2006, the Colgate graduate and her friend Cristine Zacher finished a 4,509 mile bicycle journey that started on June 17, 2006, with a rear wheel in the Pacific Ocean in Seattle, and ended 84 days later in the waters of the Atlantic in Long Branch. Speaking to the Independent Press in the house in Berkeley Heights in which she grew up, she told her story.

The idea began when Ms. MacRae took up cycling in Seattle after a knee injury prevented her from playing soccer. She started riding locally in Washington State as a way to recuperate from knee surgery and exercise.

She can't recall now when she first came upon the idea to ride from coast to coast. Then she started telling friends that she was going to do it. As she put it, "Finally, we had told so many people that we were going to do it, that we really didn't have any choice," she says, laughing.

Taking a cross-country bicycle trip is something that many could imagine as a summer adventure during a break from college studies or perhaps just after graduating. Doing the 50-plus mile per day trek when you work in a demanding profession 20 years after graduating from high school is harder to imagine. The two women were fortunate to have supportive employers that granted them leaves of absence (Ms. MacRae is a senior manager for the Enterprise Risk Services Group at Deloitte & Touche in Seattle, while Ms. Zacher is employed by Coinstar).

The trip was filled with the expected and the unexpected. They expected and in fact suffered several flat tires -- 18 of them, to be exact.

The generosity and hospitality they encountered from people along the way exceeded their expectations. "So many people were so nice. I cannot remember a bad experience the entire trip," notes Ms. MacRae. She tells the story of a couple they called their "trail angels." The "angels" were traveling by car when they encountered the women on a stretch of desolate terrain in Wyoming, and offered them water. That gesture already seemed generous to the duo. When the couple returned with Gatorade and ice cream, it turned into a small party in the wilds of Wyoming.

The weather also made it tough. The riders had to endure the usual rainstorms along the way, but when the sky started looking suspicious on a stretch of road in Kansas, the usual turned unusual.

"We started seeing the odd-green color sky that is the telltale sign of a tornado," Ms. MacRae said. At the suggestion of some locals, they ducked into a nearby rest stop. "The tip of the cone never touched the

ground, so it wasn't a tornado," she said, "but the locals said it was the closest situation you could have to being a tornado."

The mountain ranges proved to be another learning experience. Prior to their trip, the two women imagined that the Rocky Mountains would pose the greatest challenge for them, but the Ozarks proved a tougher challenge. The Ozarks lacked the winding hairpin-turn roads that make climbing those mountains easier. According to Ms. MacRae, it turned out to be one of the hardest parts of the trip.

As if long stretches of desolate road, punishing mountain ranges and near-miss tornadoes weren't enough, they had to endure the deluge of Hurricane Ernesto as it passed through the Carolinas and Virginia during the last segments of their journey.

The trip turned out to be an adventure for Ms. MacRae's parents, as well. In what proved to be a rather unusual summer, Peggy and Alfred MacRae tracked the women's progress day by day. Like many parents, they worried, especially when they did not hear from their daughter for several days. And like most parents, they celebrated her achievement.

Those interested in learning more about the journey may visit the blog the women kept during the trip, maczach.blogspot.com.

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