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Greg Shaw
Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

On the long road, strangers became neighbors

An Illinois Wesleyan professor reflects on his cross-country trek to raise funds for Habitat for Humanity.

Story by Greg Shaw, Associate Professor of Political Science

Among the desolate yet stunning vistas Shaw faced was the stretch of old Highway 66 that winds through New Mexico's Navajo reservation. Throughout his trip, he encountered the bleakness of rural poverty that had turned many towns that he passed "into little more than dots on the map."

Shaw had his picture taken at Coney Island in Brooklyn, N.Y., where his 37-day, 3,300-mile odyssey came to a conclusion.

The advice on the road ahead seemed incongruous: "You'll want to make sure your low gears are working. It's really hilly through there." This was Kansas, after all. How hilly could it be?

Riding a bicycle from San Diego to New York City this spring, raising money for Habitat for Humanity, taught me much. Two important lessons relate to the earnest warning about steep grades in the heart of the Midwest. The Kansan's comment evidences a couple of points at once. Localism is the lens through which most people, I suspect, see the world. For Kansans, those are big hills. Second, concern for a stranger's well-being is just tempting enough to lead many people, unbidden, to do some wonderful things. Shelter in a storm. A ride to a grocery store 10 miles off the route. Good directions to a free campground. Localism and kindness to strangers played out repeatedly on my 37-day, 3,300-mile journey. These principles underlie the work of Habitat for Humanity as well.

About a year ago I sat down with the executive director of our local Habitat office to discuss a cross-country fundraising ride. Joining an already very successful team is a real pleasure. This project would help finance the 11th house to be built by students at Illinois Wesleyan University and Illinois State University in as many years. Ours is the most prolific collegiate chapter in the nation. So far, so good. But when he asked me to name a fundraising goal, I nervously sputtered something about $5,000. Five thousand dollars. How in the world was I going to do that? I could plot the route, ride the miles, tolerate the weather, and so on. But raise five grand? That seemed ambitious.

Despite the initial uncertainty, this odyssey saw many delightful days on the road punctuated by loneliness, exultation, a little discouragement, many doses of humor, and several profoundly satisfying moments. I was sorry to witness yet again the decline of small-town America along the way, but the lessons about hospitality and localism were important. These five weeks of the

simple life — up with the sun, lots of exercise, carrying only the necessities, early to bed — turned out to be an emotionally complicated but rewarding experience.

After months of trip planning and a thousand miles of training rides, I found myself at the San Diego International Airport on May 2 with my bike in a box, arms loaded with about 25 pounds of gear, and full of nervous excitement. The first five days would take me across mountains, through 300 miles of desert, and up onto the Colorado Plateau at Flagstaff, Ariz., just over 7,000 feet above sea level. After that, heading east across the Navajo Reservation and following old Route 66 through northern New Mexico provided a break from the heat but also time to reflect on rural poverty and dwindling populations in small communities along the way.

It's no surprise that more than a few towns through the middle part of the country have launched a new homesteading movement. Cheap land is plentiful in lots of small towns where one can linger in the middle of Main Street at mid-day chatting with a local and pay no mind to traffic. The only catch there is finding a way to make a living.

These are towns that used to be. Half the businesses on Main Street in Tucumcari, N.M. (pop. 5,700), are boarded up. The others are mostly payday loan sharks, liquor stores, and used car lots. The habit of asking locals to confirm the existence of the next burg up ahead came quickly. One never knows if the mass exodus to the bigger cities has reduced the next spot of civilization to little more than a dot on the map. Lunch in a small-town café north of Amarillo gave me the chance to soak up laments of how things used to be there in Channing, Texas, and to take in a debate about available amenities 25 miles up the road, in the town (if you want to call it that) of Four Way. Was the convenience store still open, or not? The waitress' money was on "no." Others insisted "yes." The waitress was right. Another night of primitive camping. Another town that used to be.

The Plains states made for good traveling — and a whole range of emotions. Crossing the Mississippi River not only meant that two-thirds of the continent lay behind me, but it also marked a temporary reprieve from the loneliness of the road, as my good friend and IWU political science colleague Jim Simeone joined me there for five days of riding, through to Cincinnati. We spent our first night camped beside a factory in Hamel, Ill., at the plant manager's invitation. Our host wondered out loud over our peculiar sense of how to vacation – we must have looked odd indeed, dressed in our spandex, funny shoes, and helmets. But taking in a mediocre Elvis impersonator in town that evening renewed my perspective, kind of in the way watching people air their dirty laundry on day-time TV talk shows makes you feel normal and on-track by comparison. A few days later — parting again from my family after meeting them in Cincinnati for a night — shifted the perspective yet again, this time reawakening my homesickness.

Climbing the high parts of the Appalachians for two days drenched in a too-cool rain, especially through eastern West Virginia where trailer homes are thick on the land, once again illustrated the sorry state of low-income housing in the U.S. One family, ready to bail out of impoverished Preston County, W. Va., had hand-lettered a plywood sign in the front yard: "ALL CONTENTS OF HOUSE: $450." Apparently no takers there, on the flip-side of the American Dream. Farther on, crossing the Mason-Dixon Line into the prosperous and beautiful farm country of

Pennsylvania, raised my spirits as the hills flattened out. Rolling into New Jersey and initially finding no place to stay on my last night out marked another low point. But riding on ahead of that evening's thunderstorm and finally being taken in at a Presbyterian church in the nick of time not only kept me dry, but, more importantly, reinforced my faith in the kindness of strangers.

With the crossing reaching an end, thoughts turned to the tension that accompanies any significant travel. Specifically, the point of the journey is not to arrive, but arrival is still sweet, especially when it involves a ferry ride across New York Harbor on an absolutely perfect June day.

Arriving home via train, I learned that the steady stream of pledges continued apace. In the next two weeks the amount raised reached the goal and kept climbing, finally topping $8,000. (This year's Habitat houses will cost about $60,000 each to build.) Local people had committed to a local project, and our students would be on their way to putting a roof over the heads of yet another family.

But here's the rub: a shortage of decent, affordable housing still plagues many, perhaps most, communities in this country, and that is unlikely to end any time soon. Economic markets simply don't follow our more benevolent urges. High-visibility efforts to build houses for and with families in need just might fool us into thinking we're actually effecting a fundamental change regarding affordable housing in America, but that's a chance I'm more than willing to take. While it's true that the landscape of public policy-making is thickly littered with attempts to placate in lieu of comprehensive solutions, good work still counts. Building more than 90 houses in McLean County over the past two decades, as Habitat for Humanity has done, won't put our area's homeless shelters out of business, but it sure matters in a very tangible way to those 90-plus home-owning families who are our neighbors.

The gifts we give through this effort come around to repay us in surprising and wonderful ways. Better neighborhoods. Families busy building equity in their own houses rather than in those of their landlords. Healthy places for kids to grow. It's about local people extending a hand to others in our own communities. These new homeowners, initially unknown but who become friends through shared labor, are our newly empowered neighbors.

As I learned on my trek across America, there are blessings to receive when we regard the people we encounter not as strangers, but as neighbors. The kindness I received from people who didn't even know me, in places that may have been financially impoverished but maintained a generosity of spirit, strengthened my confidence in the persistently stubborn goodness of people. Striving to be the most generous person you know pays very interesting dividends. The lesson reinforced for me — a modern take on a passage from the 11th chapter of Ecclesiastes — is that if you cast your bread upon the water, it comes back buttered.