

At the end of the road, a beginning

By Noah Saul Bernstein '07



Bear Lake in Waterford, Maine, the ending point for Noah's journey across the United States.

It took me 64 days, 4,300 miles and 17 states to finally graduate. As I opened my sleepless eyes to the dark fog draping the city of San Francisco, I couldn't help wondering how I would survive. It was the first day of my cross-country bicycle trip, from California to Maine, with fellow Wheaton graduate John Garrett-Young '07. John and I left everything we knew behind. We escaped our daily routine and traded it in for the opportunity to rediscover what it means to be alive.

Traveling on our bikes, John and I became completely intertwined with the surrounding environment. All our senses were vibrantly awakened as America's beautiful landscape unfolded one mile at a time. Through the Sierra Mountains in California we inhaled the sweet smell of fresh pine. In Nevada, we observed the barren, desolate terrain, which is frustratingly endless on U.S. Route 50, dubbed the "loneliest road in America." Our ears became privileged listeners to the soothing cacophony of birds, flowing rivers and the hypnotic hissing of golden wheat fields in Kansas.

It was this natural beauty that John and I fought to protect. As part of our trip, John and I raised \$8,000 for Crystal Spring Earth Learning Center in Plainville, Mass. With the generosity of the Wheaton community, and family and friends, the donated money will support programs relating to nature education, ecological awareness, and land preservation and protection.

Being on a bike for 64 days, averaging 70 to 80 miles a day, took its toll on John and me. We battled dehydration, exhaustion, extreme weather and constant physical pain; overcoming such hardships made the journey incredibly valuable.

One of the most memorable struggles of the trip occurred early in our journey during a 20-mile climb from 4,000 feet to the summit of Carson Pass at 8,500 feet in the Sierra Mountains of California. John and I were not carrying enough water and inevitably, we

both ran out! The severe uphill grades combined with 100-degree heat made the climb even more difficult. John and I had different strategies for obtaining water. I flagged down passing cars, while John salvaged half-full bottles of water from the side of the road and mixed the warm water with snow from the nearby peaks. Luckily, my cousin Brian Levine works for the U.S. Forest Service in the area and came to our aid with water, Gatorade and a promise to tell all of my family members that he had to "rescue" me.

This story is one of many that repeatedly brought John and me to the same conclusion: Every new day brings challenges, but we can overcome these roadblocks through commitment and perseverance.

Through all the memorable moments, it was the people we met along the way that I will remember forever. Genuine goodness resides in the hearts of Americans. On numerous occasions, random strangers welcomed us into their homes—the sheriff in Austin, Nevada, who rescued us from a snowstorm at 7,300 feet; Gillian, the prison guard in Kansas; Bob, the goofy Baptist preacher in Kentucky; and finally David, head geology professor at Washington & Lee University in Virginia. All of these people supported us with a good meal, a shower and a desperately needed washing machine. Strangers immediately became family, and their incredible sense of generosity gave us strength. I learned to appreciate the astounding diversity of the individual stories that exist in this country.

My adventure through the back roads of America reaffirmed my strong beliefs in human potential and the capacity all of us have to push ourselves to the very edge in pursuit of transformation. The bike trip was never about reaching the end, just as college was never about graduation day. The joy is in the journey. 🇺🇸

Noah Bernstein has applied for a Fulbright Scholarship to teach English in Thailand and for an American Jewish World Service Fellowship to work for an NGO in India. He awaits word on both.