



A young person with blonde hair, wearing a red helmet and a teal tank top, is walking through a field of tall, golden-brown grass. They are carrying a bicycle over their right shoulder. The bicycle has a blue frame with white and red accents. The background is a clear, light blue sky. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

One daughter, one dad, two bikes

A test of endurance becomes
a journey of discovery.

By Christie Aschwanden

Photography by Chris Carroll

“My speedometer just clocked 40!”
Dad hollers as we zoom down the hill.
I’ve learned many things over the
past week, and the fact that hills this
steep exist in Kansas is just one of
them. Dad invited me on this Biking
Across Kansas tour to help celebrate
his recent retirement, an event that
marks a new era for us—one I hope will
allow me to get to know him better. I

had trained for the 70 or so miles we're pedaling each day, but I knew no way to prepare for the journey our relationship might take. As a child, I loved my daddy with an urgency that came from knowing that at any moment his job as an Air Force fighter pilot could steal him from me. When I was 6, a plane from my father's squadron crashed, killing the father of one of my classmates. During the next 4 years, his squadron lost eight airplanes—more than a dozen fathers. I never minded sharing Dad with my younger sister, Jill, for he gave his love and his bedtime stories equally to both of us. But the Air Force was a rival I could not compete with. No matter how much he loved me, his job always came first.

Even as an adult, my fear of losing him to his work framed our relationship. After retiring from the Air Force, Dad became a pilot for American Airlines. I was 15 at the time, and every news report of a downed plane sent my stomach plunging. As I grew older I tried to abandon these feelings. But when I turned on the television on 9/11 and saw an American Airlines plane careening into the World Trade Center, my childhood fear came rushing to the surface. Part of me knew it wasn't his plane, but the other part of me refused to exit this moment and enter the next, uncertain one. As long as I didn't make the call, he was alive.

Now that Dad has hung up his wings, I can finally let down my guard. Yes, he will still die—but not from war or the on-the-job plane crash I've imagined a million times over. Dad's retirement removed the fear that had distanced me from him. Maybe, I think, some time together will help us bridge the gap left in its absence.

So I meet Dad in Elkhart, in the southwest corner of Kansas. I arrive from my home in Colorado. He comes from Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he and Mom now live. And we set out with 800 other riders on a 529-mile journey to the state's northeast border. Physically, we are well prepared. Even at 61, Dad remains a tough jock, more fit than most guys a decade younger, and my 33-year-old legs are strong from years of bike racing. But our journey is not about the bike, and right now the emotional expedition feels the most daunting. I have difficult questions for Dad, and



Biker buddies: Christie Aschwanden with her dad, Dee Friesen.

his subtle squirming tells me that his radar has detected this. After we take a photo at the state line, he gives me permission to go on ahead. "Don't let me slow you down," he says. But I've come here to ride with him, and we both know it.

His pace suits me just fine. We easily gather momentum on the flats of western Kansas, where grain elevators shimmer in the distance. We pedal by waist-high fields of golden wheat that dance to the rhythm of the wind. I'd blazed past similar vistas at 75 miles an hour on the way to my grandparents' houses, but I'd never fully appreciated the beauty of an undulating wheat field against the blue sky.

The truth is, I've always felt like a foreigner in Kansas. This is my parents' home, not mine. Dad was in the Air Force until I was 15, and we moved every few years. There's no place that I'm from. Dad still calls Kansas home, and I yearn for his sense of belonging.

On day four we finish just a few miles from his hometown of Inman. Relatives from both sides of the family greet us with smiles and hugs. We enjoy an evening picnic in the

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town park spitting watermelon seeds and swapping stories.

As we ride side by side, Dad tells animated tales about growing up on the farm—like the time his father brought home a Brown Swiss cow and promised the kids that after they fattened it up they could sell it to buy a television. “One day we found the cow dead behind the barn, and that was it. We went another year without a TV,” Dad says, chuckling. He speaks candidly about the chasm created in his family when his younger sister, Sharon, died of an illness when he was 4 years old. But he carefully avoids the one topic I’m most curious about: his service in Vietnam.

Growing up, I thought

my father had joined the Air Force out of a desire to fly. But as I got older, I puzzled over why he’d joined when he did, during the Vietnam War. The pacifist Mennonite church he was raised in would have given him automatic conscientious-objector status. Dad had never told me anything about Vietnam, and I’d never asked.

One day as we ride, he tells me about going off to Air Force pilot training. The tale proceeds chronologically. When it reaches his Vietnam assignment, though, he points to an oncoming truck that’s still just a tiny dot in the distance and tells me, “I’d better drop behind you now.” End of story. The next time our conversation approaches Vietnam, Dad develops a leg cramp that needs immediate attention. We stop our bikes, and he shakes out his leg until our conversation has moved on.

Much of our talk focuses on the ride—which way the wind blows (always head-on), how far to the next food and water station. If it were up to me, we might skip a stop or two, especially when they come in the middle of one of his stories. Dad proves strong on the bike, and it’s not like he needs the rest. But he refuses to miss a chance to chat with other riders.

Within a few days, my father has befriended seemingly everyone on the ride. He introduces me to dozens of people, like Wanda Groves, an 83-year-old woman who took up bicycling in her 60s, and Carl Thieszen, whom he converses with in Plautdietsch, the German Mennonite dialect Dad’s parents spoke at home. After a while I’ve had enough. I came here to get to know my father, not a bunch of people I’ll never see again. His compulsion to make friends with all 800 riders feels like a wedge between us. Part of me is still the little girl who longs for her daddy’s undivided attention, and he can’t seem to oblige.

One evening in Onaga, we’re sitting in sleeping bags in one of the school gyms where we slumber each night, and Dad strikes up a conversation with Gary Isaac, a liberal-minded Mennonite pastor who is Dad’s age and grew up a few towns away. I’m sitting across from Dad, curled up with my journal, listening to him tell Gary about the coloring books depicting heroic World War II soldiers that he doodled in as a boy. He tells Gary how he felt duty-bound to follow in their footsteps and make a stand against the threat of communism. So he went to fight in Vietnam. “It was our time,” he says. “Our country needed us, so we went.”

When he turned 18, Dad tells us (for I’ve abandoned my journal and am leaning toward him), his pastor shoved a conscientious-objector form in his face and demanded that he sign. Dad refused. “I saw guys who never came to church who signed,” he says, his pace slowing to emphasize his words as he explains his frustration with the church for telling him what to think, say, and do, without ever taking the time to explain why these were the correct choices. I rub my eyes to erase the tears I feel coming as I nod my head. He could be describing my own struggle with the military system that had demanded I sacrifice a normal childhood, with its stable roots and a father you know will come home every

night, for a cause that my parents never sufficiently explained to me.

Seeing this parallel makes me feel closer than ever to Dad, but also a little guilty. All these years I thought he’d joined the Air Force for the thrill of flying. I never realized he did it, too, out of love for his country. He never meant to make me feel unsafe. He wanted only to protect his country—and me. This revelation engulfs me like a warm wave. But beneath it lies a twinge of anger at the casual way he relates the information to a stranger, but never directly to me.

I don’t press the issue just then. As the week progresses, though, I return to Vietnam. When I ask Dad what he did during the war, he tells me about working on a school for Vietnamese kids. When I press him about his missions, he adopts curt military euphemisms. After a while I begin to understand that it is not me that Dad is shielding from his war experience; it is himself. “I don’t feel I did anything dishonorable,” he tells me, but “that chapter is closed.” I yearn to crack open Dad’s Vietnam chapter, to understand how it shaped him and why—more than 30 years later—he remains so guarded about this experience. But I cannot force him to analyze events he would rather leave behind, so I reluctantly let it go.

On our eighth and last day of riding, we reach the Missouri River just as a rainstorm unleashes itself over the border town of White Cloud. Our journey across Kansas has introduced me to the young man my father once was, and I see a part of myself reflected in that young idealist, determined to find his own way and his own truths. I may not agree with all of Dad’s choices, but I’m beginning to understand them. I have many more questions for him, but today, in the rain, is not the time to ask them. Dad and I have other bike rides planned. There will be other chances. 📌

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