

DAD'S *Journey*

81 YEAR-OLD WITH PARKINSON'S RIDES
DREAM EXPEDITION ACROSS CANADA

BY TARA McGUIRE



Dan McGuire heads toward Inuvik in
Canada's Northwest Territories.

I WASN'T THAT surprised when my Dad told me he wanted to ride his bike across Canada. He'd done it before. A few times. Left to right and right to left. But that was years ago and this was different.

Now, he wanted to touch the outer reaches of our country with his bike tires. The crusts of our sandwich, the ones the kids don't eat. The farthest west, north, south and east a person could go, on a road. "But why Dad, you've already done it?" I asked him. "Because I love Canada" was his answer. Well, who could argue with that?

Dad took to biking in his mid-forties when, as for a lot of us, running becomes just too painful on the joints. He got on that bike and something magical happened. The saddle was his happy place. When Dad was on that skinny seat with the wind in his face and a burning in his thighs he felt content. Well he never told me that but he must have or he wouldn't have spent so much of his life in that uncomfortable position.

But Dad was 80 now and suffering from, among other things, arthritis in his knees and hands, scoliosis that made his spine swirl like a snake, macular degeneration in at least one eye and the biggie, Parkinson's disease. His once muscular frame was so diminished and the medications so overwhelming that occasionally when he'd fall asleep at the dinner table he'd look very much like a skinny grieving question mark.

Two of his six kids, my sister Janet and I were available to help him for the first stretch. We set about equipping a van and tent trailer with sleeping bags and grizzly bear bangers, pots and pans and bug hats, bike parts and maps.

It took Dad, Janet and our dog Mocha three days just to drive from Vancouver up to Dawson in the Yukon. They had to wait until the ice was off the river to cross and the summer road was cleared of snow to get started, but once they got the go ahead Dad began his journey in late May 2013 at the "Top of the World Highway," the most western road in Canada, where it borders Alaska. The road was rough, muddy and rocky. Progress was slow but he revelled in it, stopping to take photos of the majestic northern vistas. He passed

wolves, elk, big horn sheep and eagles as he peddled along alone. Janet would make him meals on the camp stove and encourage him to eat as much as possible. The Parkinson's meds take away his appetite but he needed his strength to accomplish 10+ hours of cycling a day. Then, as he began to tire, they'd tie a bright pink or green ribbon to a scrubby little tree by the roadside to mark the spot he'd left off. His motto was "EFI". You'll have to ask him yourself what that stands for. They'd shuttle to the nearest pull-out or camp spot to bed down for the night and get up to do it all over again the next day.

They hung a left near Dawson and headed north up the Dempster Highway heading for Canada's most northerly road at Inuvik. They were turned back at Eagle Plains where the road was washed out by the heavy melt. He vowed to come back and complete that stretch later. After three weeks of tough sledding they were closing in on Whitehorse. My husband, 10 year old daughter and I flew up to take over as support crew. While Dad

rode we prepared meals, tried to keep him hydrated, did laundry and minor bike maintenance, found places to camp and, when available, comfy hotel beds for Dad's weary bones and twisted spine.

Through rain, long dusty gravel construction zones and the unending climbs

of the Continental Divide, Dad just kept on peddling. He was getting weather worn, bug bitten, skinny and ... stronger.

Somewhere in Northern B.C. we had to buy him suspenders to hold up his bike shorts as he was losing so much weight. Because the Parkinson's made it hard for him to swallow he often drank his half a beer at the end of the day through a straw. He had trouble doing up buttons and toothpaste tubes. Simply taking a shower and getting dressed could take more than an hour because his fingers just weren't co-operating anymore. And through all of this Dad just kept on riding. Once he was on that bike he wasn't shaky or weak, he was unstoppable. The disease was left behind. Dad doesn't talk much, but I think this was his idea of a good time. Plus, all the exercise helps to keep the 'Parkies' as he calls it, at bay.

Family support ran out around Saskatoon. "But Dad, how are you going to go it alone, you need so much help?" I asked him over

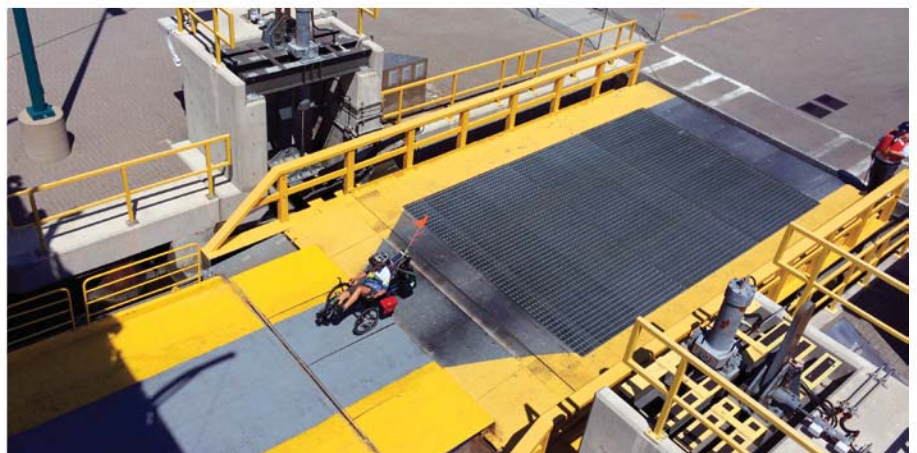
his crackling cell phone. In his shaky whispered voice he told me. "People are nice,

People are nice, they'll help.

they'll help." People are nice? That was his fallback position? Dad had pie at a rec centre bridge club, dinner with strangers and a few times a free night's stay at a roadside hotel. People are nice.

He made it almost to Winnipeg before he called it quits that August. He had ridden

BELOW: Dan McGuire crosses the bridge onto a ferry to Newfoundland alone in spring 2014.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Dan McGuire is presented with the Canadian flag at Cape Spear, the eastern most point in Canada; Changing a flat tire; at Point Pelee, Canada's southern most reach.

over 4,000K. Later we found out he'd fallen off his bike (not for the first time) west of town and been taken to hospital. A detail he neglected to mention at the time. I told Dad I was proud of him and that he'd done so much to prove what people with Parkinson's are capable of.

Dad was not easily deterred. That fall (2013) with my brother Kevin

as his roadie this time, they flew back up to Whitehorse. There was the little matter of the unfinished most northern road, the Dempster Highway to Inuvik. They rented a camper fit for the outback and headed back to the place he'd been forced to stopped before. EFI, remember. I got the feeling he wanted to do it while he still could, before his once strong body began to shake and curl up like a fiddlehead.

Once again, after days and days of trying the mud was just too deep and thick

to carry on. That northern box would remain unchecked, for now.

Spring 2014 he decided to pick up the trail just west of Winnipeg. This time he had a fancy new three wheeled bike so he wouldn't fall over. A sort of reverse tricycle with two

wheels in the front and one in the back. He could even pull over and take naps without getting off.

The tables had turned, Dad was now the mischievous teenager out there taking risks and getting into trouble and we were left waiting and wondering at home. He was still insisting that he could go it alone. After all, he had attached bright green flags to his bike for safety. What could go wrong? I asked him not to nap on his trike on the shoulder of the highway. He had a way of slumping over like a limp doll that made him look unconscious. There were a few times the police stopped to investigate.

It's important to have a purpose.

Perhaps concerned citizens had called in to report a dead man sitting on a tricycle on the side of the Trans Canada?

Dad was 81 now and during his years as a touring cyclist he'd built up a large community of like minded (OK, crazy) friends. It was these friends who arrived one by one, to blow on the embers of his dream. First, the very enthusiastic Chris rode shotgun through the unpopulated, bug infested sector of northern Ontario with its foul weather and fierce headwinds. Then a bike mechanic friend, Peter and his wife Diana, flew out to spend their vacation in southern Ontario zig zagging along with Dad. They were with him when he reached the southern most point of Canada at Point Pelee. Dad was picking up steam.

Ross came to help too and another old bike buddy Peter, flew out to take a shift from Toronto and through the maritimes. When Dad was interviewed by the local CBC affiliate in PEI the reporter asked him why he was doing what he was doing? There was a definite twinkle in his eye when he said in his soft voice "It's important to have a purpose."

Fittingly, Dad would take the ferry to Newfoundland alone. Members of the Parkinson's Society of Newfoundland and Labrador met him and welcomed him to the rock. They took him out for dinner and found him a nice place to stay. A few days later when Dad arrived at the Cape Spear lighthouse, by police escort, there was a small but enthusiastic crowd clapping and cheering him on. As far east as you can go and still be in Canada. They lowered the flag and presented him with the red maple leaf on the rocky shore of the Atlantic. His long ride was over.

But a flag, like our country, has four corners. Dad had slowly traversed more than 10,000K of our vast land under his own steam. Bad weather, illnesses and other people's doubt had not deterred him. When I told him how proud I was of him and what a great accomplishment he'd achieved he said: "What do you think about next September for the Dempster?" He would be 82.

Dan McGuire completed his Canadian odyssey in Inuvik in August 2015. ■