

Five Bicycles in Kalamazoo

How a vibrant cycling community in western Michigan copes with unthinkable tragedy

By Jason Gay

*K*alamazoo, Mich.

The road looks like it could be almost anywhere in America.

Two lanes, ruler straight, it can be taken in and out of town. Where the horror happened, up on North Westnedge Avenue, there's a small hill, nothing major, just a gentle roller, past a string of greenhouses and a county park.

When I visit, there's still debris scattered at the scene. The shattered pieces of a bicycle's tail light. A set of tire levers, used to change a flat. A broken-off piece of sunglasses. A fragment of a carbon fiber frame—which, upon closer inspection, turns out to be part of a "dropout" that holds a bike's rear wheel.

It is both heartbreaking and difficult to comprehend.

Then, against a chain-link fence, you can't miss them: They are covered in flowers, ornaments, and handwritten notes. Throughout the day, people stop to look at them, to pay respects, and to confirm what happened on this road on Tuesday, June 7 was real.

Five bicycles, painted white.

"It's bike church," Doug Kirk said flatly. "There's a camaraderie. I've been riding seriously since 1982, and I'm close to quarter million miles now, but riding in a group? It's just so much fun."

We were sitting in the Water Street Coffee Joint near the train tracks in Kalamazoo's downtown. It was three days after the tragedy which had shaken Western Michigan and the country: nine cyclists on an early-evening group ride struck by the driver of a pick-up truck, right near the line where Kalamazoo ends and Cooper Township begins. Nine riders. All nine hit.

Four of the cyclists were injured and hospitalized.

Five were reported dead at the scene.

Doug Kirk shook his head. Tall and training-fit, the 64-year-old has been a longtime cyclist in the region, a past president of the Kalamazoo Cycling Club, and a club ride leader for 15 or so years. He didn't know the killed and injured riders very well. But like everyone who rode a bike in Kalamazoo, he was still trying to process what had happened.

"It's a community," he said.



Police and rescue workers attend to the scene after multiple bicyclists were struck by a vehicle in a deadly crash on June 7. PHOTO: CHELSEA PURGAHN/KALAMAZOO GAZETTE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

How did it happen? Why did it happen? If law enforcement had an idea, the Kalamazoo county prosecutor, Jeff Getting, was keeping that information closely held. Toxicology results have yet to be made public. This was known: That night, three separate calls had been made to police prior to the bike incident, reporting erratic driving by a pick-up truck of similar description.

The driver, a 50-year-old man named Charles Pickett Jr., of Battle Creek, had been apprehended. On Thursday, Getting, the Kalamazoo prosecutor, stood on the steps of the county government building in a blue suit and read off the charges, which included five charges of second-degree murder.

"What we are alleging is that the defendant, Charles Edward Pickett Jr., acted in wanton and willful disregard of the likelihood that the natural tendency of his actions would cause death or great bodily harm and, as a result, did kill and murder Fred (Tony) Nelson, Suzanne Sippel, Deborah Bradley, Lorenz (Larry) Paulik, and Melissa Fevig-Hughes."

The deceased ranged in age from 42 to 74 years old. There were additional charges related to the four injured survivors: Jennifer Johnson, 40, Paul Gobble, 47, Paul Runnels, 65, and Sheila Jeske, 53.

Pickett would plead not guilty to all of the charges at his arraignment the next

day—reached Tuesday, his court-appointed lawyer, Alan Koenig, declined comment. Denied bond, Pickett Jr. remains held in jail.

It felt so senseless and inexplicable. A devastating photograph would appear in the hometown Kalamazoo Gazette: a circle of crumpled bikes recovered at the North Westnedge scene, frames bent or smashed into bits, wheel rims dramatically curled and tangled.

These bikes belonged to riders.

Jennifer. Paul. Sheila. Paul.

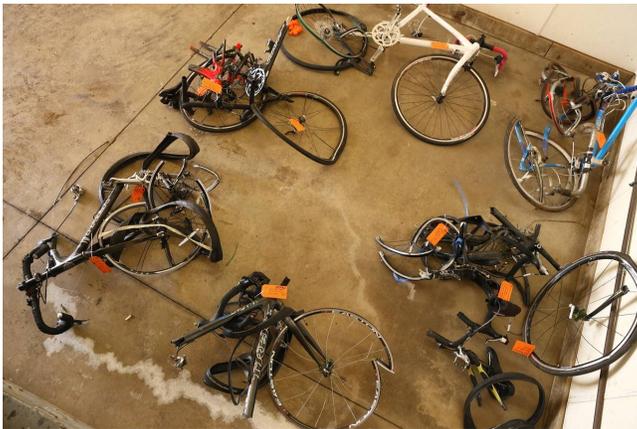
Tony. Suzanne. Debbie. Larry. Melissa.

Parents. Grandparents. Sons. Daughters. Spouses. Neighbors. Professionals. Volunteers. Athletes. Cyclists.

All of them were members of the Chain Gang, an experienced local cycling group that had been riding in and around Kalamazoo for more than a decade and a half.

“Friends,” said Paul Selden, the founder of Bike Friendly Kalamazoo.

It was the nightmare.



In this photo taken June 9, mangled bicycles are tagged as evidence at the Michigan State Police crime lab in Kalamazoo, Mich. PHOTO: MARK BUGNASKI/ALAMAZOO GAZETTE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Tuesday night had been a panic. Reports began coming in, about a bad scene involving a vehicle and bike riders, but details were fuzzy. If you rode a bike in Kalamazoo, you probably heard from somebody.

“On Facebook you started seeing all kinds of posts—‘Are you OK?’ ‘Check in please,’” said Kathy Kirk, Doug’s wife, a serious cyclist herself.

“It became a frenzy,” said John Kittredge, another local rider, who also sponsors local cycling events. “‘Please call me.’ ‘Please text me back.’”

Doug Stevenson co-owns the Alfred E. Bike shop downtown, where there's almost always a shop ride on Tuesday nights, led by Stevenson's son, Cullen. That Tuesday had been unseasonably windy and cool. Cullen went on Twitter and cancelled the ride.

Still, Doug Stevenson's phone rang a bunch of times that night, and also at the shop on Wednesday, too. So did Cullen's phone. They were callers who dreaded checking in, who just wanted to be sure.



The names of the victims written on a memorial. *PHOTO: JASON GAY/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

“We’ve never seen anything of this scale,” Doug Stevenson said quietly, as a pair of customers came in to pick up bikes.

Mark Rose had been one of the founders of the Chain Gang back when it launched in 1999.

Rose had been motivated to start the club going after getting into indoor spinning classes. “I was pretty much a novice,” he said.

Kalamazoo is good biking country—not far out of town, there is beautiful terrain and country roads and a converted railway that runs all the way to Lake Michigan. There are thriving scenes for road riding, gravel riding, mountain biking and thick-tired “fat biking” in the cold winter. If you want to ride your bike, you can always find people in Kalamazoo to ride with.

The Chain Gang was not set up to be a hardcore competitive group. It had a “no-drop” rule, Rose said—if a rider could not keep up the pace, or he or she had a mechanical problem or flat, they wouldn’t leave you behind. Someone would drop back to help. The idea was to look after each other and have a nice time. Often, they’d go for a beer afterward.

“It was casual,” said Rose.

Rose had been outside working in his yard on Tuesday when his brother, Brad, called and left a message, about an incident involving cyclists, with multiple fatalities. The location made Rose nervous. He knew that was a Chain Gang route.

“It was pretty obvious to us, because of where they were,” Rose said. “I was in disbelief. I called [Brad] back and said, ‘You mean people were injured?’”

“He said, ‘No. There were fatalities.’”



A cyclist takes a moment to place a flower at one of the ghost bikes during the Peace-Pedal-Pray memorial ride in Kalamazoo, Mich., on June 12 *PHOTO: CHELSEA PURGAHN/KALAMAZOO GAZETTE/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

Later, Brad Rose would travel to the parking lot where the Chain Gang had started its Tuesday night ride. He recognized some of the vehicles, their bike racks, still in the parking lot.

Chain Gang cars.

What happened in Kalamazoo breaks a heart a hundred ways. It breaks a heart on the facts alone: so much loss, so much grief. It breaks a heart for the families of the cyclists and their close friends, who feel the impact most deeply. It breaks a heart for the community. Kalamazoo already suffered a tragedy this year that attracted national attention—a mass shooting which had killed six.

For cyclists, Kalamazoo breaks a heart because this is the deepest fear. It also breaks a heart because these group rides are essential to the sport. Group rides are often where bike riders become cyclists, where they learn handling techniques, etiquette and essential skills like pace lines, in which riders take turns (“pulls”) at the front and then gently rotate to the back to protect themselves from the wind.



Cyclists ride to the memorial site during the Peace-Pedal-Pray memorial ride in Kalamazoo, Mich. *PHOTO: CHELSEA PURGAHN/KALAMAZOO GAZETTE/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

“It’s where it all starts,” said Brent Bookwalter, a pro cyclist for BMC, an elite professional team, who grew up in nearby Grand Rapids and this July hopes to compete in the Tour de France. “I wouldn’t be where I am without that great community of caring people in Western Michigan.”

Group rides become families. Some of them stick together for decades, even if

the riders might not be able to recognize each other in street clothes, without helmets and Spandex. “You know people by what they ride,” said Tim Krone, who owns Kalamazoo’s Pedal Bicycles shop. “Hey, you’re red Fuji guy!” A group ride might be as important an outlet to a cyclist as anything in his or her life. There are fast rides and slower rides, but the beloved rides are the ones in which everyone looks out for each other and maintains an agreed-upon pace, making the group feel like a single, fluid organism.

“There’s nothing like it,” said Kathy Kirk. “And you know exactly when it comes together and when it falls apart and you’re like, ‘God, that was great.’”

The day after the tragedy, Doug and Kathy Kirk met up with some of Kathy’s teammates and collected and painted three of the five white bicycles now on North Westnedge. Known as Ghost Bikes, these bicycles are often installed at the scene of cycling fatalities, a chilling reminder of lives lost.

On Wednesday, June 8, hundreds of people gathered in downtown Kalamazoo for a “Silent Ride” to commemorate the victims and the injured. The mood was raw—part mournful, part heartened to see so many cyclists on the road.

John Kittredge said he sought out faces and bikes he knew. He wanted to be with his friends. “We talked a lot about how life is short, and how when you’re on a bike it’s the ultimate freedom,” Kittredge said. “It’s like you’re 12 years old again.”

The funerals began this week. Early Tuesday evening, local cyclists planned to set out and complete the ride the Chain Gang members never got the chance to finish. Lance Armstrong intended to be one of the participants.

Not far underneath the grieving in Kalamazoo, there is anger. Cyclists already feel targeted, invisible, deprioritized. The loss of life here was appalling, but there is too much of this everywhere.

“Nine people?” said Mikael Henriksson, a Western Michigan cyclist who twice competed in the Race Across America, and left one of his old cycling medals at the memorial on North Westnedge. “I’m sick of this...it’s become worse.”

Inside Alfred E. Bike, Doug Stevenson pointed to a crumpled frame on the floor of the store, dropped off by a bandaged customer recently struck by a car in another, totally separate incident.

This is not a rare thing, Stevenson said.

“Throwing the book at this guy will make people more satisfied that justice will be done,” he said of the June 7 incident. “But really, it’s the road rage drivers, or entitled drivers who get mad because they have to click off the cruise control momentarily. You wish they could just tilt their perspective a little, so they



A sign outside the First Congregational Church in Kalamazoo, Mich. PHOTO: JASON GAY/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

could realize, 'There are some bikers, I need to slow the heck down for five minutes.' It isn't such a big deal in the scheme of things."

One night I was in Kalamazoo, there was a candlelight vigil at the Saint Thomas More parish, where two of the fallen riders, Larry Paulik and Tony

Nelson, were active members. Leaving the church after an emotional service, I watched a mother and a pair of children ride away on their bicycles—the two children riding in front, the mother riding in back. Amid all the mourning, it looked like a beautifully defiant act. A car passed slowly. The girl pedaling in front smiled and waved.

On a road not far away, another church posted a hand-drawn sign with a bicycle nestled in the center.

WE SEE YOU. WE LOVE YOU, it read.

It's barely a week later. But Kalamazoo rides on.

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