



Blind Ambition

PHOTOGRAPH BY GREG SIPLE STORY BY GAGE POORE

→ TANDEM BICYCLE TOURISTS always strike me as exceptional. I've run the notion of riding tandem by my wife a number of times, and, believe me, it's never going to happen. In the case of Thomas Hyatt, 52, and Joseph Shearer, 64, who have been riding tandem together since 2007, it's plain to see the utility in their partnership. Thomas has retinitis pigmentosa, a progressive genetic retinal disease, and has been totally blind since age 26. When the two, with Joe's wife Susan driving support, visited us in early June, 2015, they were in the early weeks of Blind Ride 2015 — riding the TransAm Trail to raise money for charitable blindness and veteran organizations. "We want our ride to be a motivator for others," Joseph wrote. "If an old guy and a blind guy can ride a bicycle across the country, what can you do?"

The two retired veterans met in Niceville, Florida, when Joseph answered a message from his cycling club stating that a local blind man was seeking a riding partner to pilot his tandem bike. Both were looking at getting back into shape through cycling. Starting out riding 10 miles at a time, the two soon participated in four Great Ohio Bike Adventures (GOBA) events of 250 to 400 miles each and had completed multiple centuries. In the 14,000 miles the two have pedaled together over the years, they have developed a friendship and deep respect for each other.

Thomas said he "misses driving and being able to read print," but has "no strong desire to see again." Gesturing to the end of his cane, he said, "This is my eyeball," and with a sly smile, "Siri is my girlfriend." Regarding his stoker, Joseph wrote, "Thomas is quick to point out when the gears needed adjusting because of the sound." He also notes that Thomas is a human jukebox, singing along to the nearly 12,000 songs they had playing from a small speaker attached to the bike. "I get my energy and excitement from seeing the sights along the way. Thomas gets his energy from the people he meets. Thomas is the extrovert." Joseph described these meetings as the "real scenery" for Thomas. "He collects names, stories, phone numbers, admiration, and friendships." When they finished in Yorktown, Virginia, on August 29, 2015, Thomas said all the employees from the visitors center came down to see them because they were amazed at meeting the first blind person to complete a cross-country bike trip. "I wouldn't have ridden a tandem if I were sighted," he said. "I probably would not have done the trip at all."

From Adventure Cycling's National Bicycle Touring Portrait Collection. © 2015 Adventure Cycling Association.

Bring the **Bicycle Eclectic** traveling portrait exhibition to your town. Contact Greg Siple for more information: gsiple@adventurecycling.org



Open Road Gallery

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