

COMMUNITY HERO

WRITTEN BY CARLEY DRYDEN
PHOTOGRAPHED BY LILY STEIN



MARTIN HOWARD



artin Howard recently sat in his first bicycle traffic jam. He was waiting to cross a bridge into Portland.

"I actually had to wait through two signals of bicyclists," he said. "There were literally 120 cyclists in front of me commuting into the city to go to work, run errands and go shopping."

Howard hopes one day this will happen in his city — Long Beach. Howard and a few of his cycling friends recently reinvigorated an old bike advocacy group called *Bikeable Communities*, devoted to bringing communities together through cycling. Their future goals include connecting the fragmented bike infrastructure within the city, installing a bike boulevard in Bixby Knolls, and increasing the city's bike safety and education programs.

Howard's dream is to build a bike route from Vancouver, Canada to San Diego on Pacific Coast Highway, so "anyone who wants to ride along the coast can have a safe and rewarding experience." The Long Beach resident rides his bike along PCH every day, six days a week, averaging 30 miles a day. He's biked from Port Angeles, Washington, 1600 miles down to Los Angeles, twice. It took him just 13 days.

Every year he logs 8,000 to 10,000 miles. He rides from San Francisco to Los Angeles in four days annually with a group of riders. He bikes from Mammoth Lakes to Los Angeles or vice versa. And he just got back from a 204-mile race between Seattle and Portland. He finished first. "And I'm an old guy. I'm 49 years old," he said. Howard even takes his bicycle on vacations, every single one, much to the chagrin of his three teenaged children. It costs \$100 each way to ship the bicycle in a special bag on the plane, and requires Howard to disassemble the bike each time. But for Howard, biking is life—a hobby he picked up when a neighbor encouraged him to ride down to San Diego with a group in 1982. Howard did his 1600-mile West Coast trip solo the next year, and again the year after.

Soon after graduating from Whittier College in 1984, he began cycling competitively. A member of the U.S. National team, he raced in 30 states, completed the Tour of England, Tour of Ireland and Tour of Mexico, and rode in the 1988 Olympic trials. While competing, he said, he rode 15,000 to 25,000 miles a year, was 6 feet 2 inches tall, 145 pounds and 4 percent body fat.

Although he retired from competition in 1988 to help his father develop a construction management company, *Howard CDM*, which Howard is now president and CEO of, he has remained a cyclist. "Biking has taught me so much about life. It helped me persevere through tough times, it's been an outlet, a teacher," he said.

So it didn't take much for the city to persuade Howard to jump on board its bike advocacy and growth plans. "I felt it was my turn to give back to a sport that had made my life so complete," he said. "It continues to reward me every time I ride." Howard wanted to create opportunities in the city for anyone to experience what he has — the beauty of the terrain you cover, the wind blowing through your hair, the fresh air. "One thing that's happened to America is we don't get outside. We're behind a desk, we're behind a computer screen, and kids are behind 'Call of Duty.' With cycling, you get the wind in your hair, the sights and the sounds and the camaraderie of riding with others. We need to promote that more," he said.

Long Beach was recently voted one of the top 25 most bikeable cities, but Howard knows a city that in recent years added more than 80 miles of additional bike lanes and sharrows can do better. "We really can be one of the greatest bicycle cities in the country," he said. Longtime friend Luciano Gonzales, Co-Director of Bikeable Communities, said Howard's longtime involvement in cycling and his high-level talent attract new bikers. "Those who are learning tend to look up to those who possess the most talent," he said. In return, Howard's talent is taking care of people and giving them direction, Gonzales said. "His natural involvement in the community and respect from riders gives the bike advocacy group greater credibility," Gonzales said. "Without Martin and the dynamism of his personality, we would have gone off much more slowly than we are." ●

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