

MIKE CIMBURA IN
THE ELECTRIC-ASSIST
CARGO BIKE CALLED
THE BOOTLEGGER.



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THE
BEAST,
THE
BOOTLEGGER,
AND THE
DEATH
RIDE

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HOW MIKE CIMBURA
DEFIES THE DEGENERATIVE DISEASE
THAT HAS TAKEN ALMOST EVERYTHING FROM HIM—AND
BECOMES A CYCLIST AGAIN

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IF CYCLING, A SPORT SYNONYMOUS WITH MOVEMENT, EXERTION, AND EXHILARATION, HAD ITS POLAR OPPOSITE IN A DISEASE, IT WOULD BE ALS.

HE COULD HEAR THE WIND.

MIKE AND ZACH RIDING IN FORT COLLINS, COLORADO, WITH HORSETOOTH RESERVOIR IN THE BACKGROUND.

AND DESPITE THE FULL-FACE HELMET that he hated and the goggles that protected the last part of his body that he could still move, he could feel it. On his face like he used to. His cheeks. His mouth. It washed over him in a thunderous rush.

He could feel the tires. The one to his left wanted to rise up, catch the air, obey the physics and send them hurtling over the edge. He could sense that Zach, seated behind him, was pushing with all his strength, digging that left wheel into the ground, steering the cargo bike's 500-pound load like a snowmobile through the left hand turn of the switchback.

They swept through it at 50 miles an hour. He could hear the smile in Zach's voice as he hollered, "Whoa!" He knew his friend was crouched low over the handlebar of the Bootlegger, trying to get as aero as possible. Trying to go even faster down Red Mountain Pass in Colorado's San Juan Mountains. The goal is for them to one day hit 60 mph. When Mike Cimbura was well, before the feeding tube, before the tracheostomy, before the total paralysis and the wheelchair, before the indignities and the frustration and the tears, before all the bills, he'd hit 62 on his road bike. They hadn't come close the previous year, in their first Death Ride Tour together.

They wouldn't today, at this year's event, either. But they will keep trying.

Before ALS, Mike Cimbura was a hell of a rider. With Zach and the Bootlegger and a charity ride called the Death Ride Tour, he still is.

If cycling, a sport synonymous with movement, exertion, and exhilaration, had its polar opposite in a disease, it would be amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS. The neurodegenerative disease weakens motor neurons that deliver messages between the brain, spinal cord, and muscles.

As the neurons die, the muscles become paralyzed. People with ALS lose the ability to move, talk, eat, and eventually, breathe; they do not, however, lose the ability to feel. But when they are hot, they cannot sweat, when they are cold, they cannot shiver, and when their feet are placed in a tub full of Epsom salts and scalding water for 20 minutes by a caretaker who neglects to check the temperature, they can feel themselves burn but cannot escape their pain. In perhaps the cruelest twist of all, ALS mostly leaves their brains alone. They know their bodies are holding them hostage. They typically die of respiratory failure. If they choose to get a tracheostomy—a surgically created opening in the neck through which

they breathe via a tube connected to a ventilator—they usually die from infection, heart failure, or blood clots. Every 90 minutes, someone is diagnosed with ALS. The average life expectancy after diagnosis is two to five years, it tends to strike those between the ages of 40 and 70, and it occurs more often in men. There is no known cause or cure. Nicole Cimbura, Mike's wife of 24 years, calls it "the Beast."

Before the Beast caught him, Mike, 52, lived a life of constant motion.

He began road racing as a freshman in college. After graduating from the University of California Santa Barbara, he moved to

Lakewood, Colorado, where he and his younger brother John started their own racing team. They handpicked the guys, kept it small, found a few sponsors, and did pretty well.

As a Category 3 rider, Mike wasn't the fastest. But he was dedicated. Even while married, working full-time as an accountant, and starting a family, he still averaged 30 hours of training and two—sometimes more—races a week between March and September. Mike was just as driven in the off-season, picking John up at 5 on Saturday mornings to snowshoe up nearby Loveland Pass. They'd spend two and a half hours climbing through thigh-deep snow, then snowboard back down. Then they'd do it again. And often a third time.

"He always had a massive amount of energy," says John, 46, who raced as a Cat 2 on the team. "To sit still and not do something physically active I think just drove him nuts."

His work ethic paid off, especially on the hills. Mike's teammate and friend Leonard Callejo nicknamed him "Blade."

"Regardless of how in shape I was, I could never outclimb Mike," says Callejo, 50. "He was so narrow and thin, I couldn't draft off him and I would just see this tiny blade pedal away from me."

If he didn't drop them on the climbs, Mike would crush them in other ways.

"We'd all be in pain and Mike would just not stop talking," says Duane Marlatt, 50, another former teammate. "He used to annoy us all, in a good way."

Cycling tapped Mike's essence. It channeled his drive, his energy, his analytical mind, and his ability to mentor. He taught pack etiquette, tactics, and training concepts to new racers, built up bikes for them, then taught them how to wrench on their own. He was always taking coworkers or neighbors out on the road, hoping they'd find their bliss there, too.

But he was more than a cyclist. He was the

barn dad who taught his eldest daughter how to drive an F250 attached to a horse trailer. He was the science geek who helped his two girls win awards for building bridges that weighed ounces yet could hold 50 pounds. He was the breadwinner who passed up the promotion that would have meant missing his son's football games. He was the partner who always had Nicole's back. He was the friend who loved music, mosh pits, and playing drums. So when the Beast came for him on that October day in 2014, the day he did not have the strength to clip his own fingernails, there was so much for it to take.

The neurologist assured Mike and Nicole it was not ALS, and even wrote as much in a follow-up letter. Mike went on weekly business trips that November and December, and while he was gone Nicole would read the letter every night before bed to calm herself down. She prayed for cancer. Something they could beat. Until Mike called her and said he couldn't lift his carry-on, couldn't make it up the stairs, was starting to stumble.

"I feel like every day more of me is dying," he said. "My body feels like it's changing."

And she knew.

Mike and Nicole still sleep in the same bed, on two twin mattresses that fit perfectly inside their king-size frame. Her side is covered in a pink One Direction blanket not because she's a fan but because caring for Mike often requires a person working on either side of him and so it's something she lays out every morning for people to crawl all over. Mike's side is an air mattress that hums constantly as the cells within it alternately inflate and deflate to relieve pressure on his body.

On Nicole's bedside is a small table with, among other things, a Bible and two photos of her and Mike. One is his college graduation in 1992, the other from a Christmas party in 2009. In both, they are smiling broadly. On Mike's bedside, among other things, is a rectangular ventilator, a humidifier, a small oxygen canister, and a tall IV pole holding a plastic bag filled with mustard yellow liquid. The liquid is his breakfast and the monitor on the pole says it's feeding him at a rate of 200 milliliters an hour through a tube that snakes across his purple comforter and into his gut. Behind him, a gray, padded sling with adjustable yellow straps hangs flat against the wall. The straps connect to a plastic hanger that hooks to a mechanical

track in the ceiling that travels across the room and into the shower.

Mike is propped up in bed. He has brown hair, a brown beard, and he's wearing a blue vest over a Denver Broncos shirt. The vest is inflated with air and vibrating with a loud *chug-chug-chug*, shaking loose mucus he can't cough up on his own. He's staring up at Nicole, who is standing by his side. He's trying to say something.

Nicole, 48, is tall and blond and almost always moving. She gets up every two hours during the night to care for her husband and works full time as a teacher during the day. She rarely yawns. She calls Mike "babe" and the people around her "hon." She says "blessed" often.

Now she is still, her arms crossed, her blue eyes locked onto his blue eyes. She slowly begins to recite a series of numbers that each represent a series of letters, pausing whenever he responds with a single, slight blink.

"1, 2, 3, 4, P, Q, R, S...S?" she asks. "5, U...U? 1, A, B, C...C?" She stops the vest. She knows what he needs. She almost always knows. Sometimes when she's really tired she can't store the letters in her head and she writes them on a small whiteboard on his

side of the bed. S-U-C. He needs suction.

She flips on a suction machine and it drones like an air compressor. Then she runs a narrow catheter into his tracheostomy. She feeds it into his lungs, gently suctioning up the mucus shaken loose by the vest.

Mike normally communicates using the tablet set up above his bed. It uses infrared technology to track his eye movements so he can do stuff like surf the web, watch Netflix, email, and speak. To talk, he locates the appropriate letter on the keyboard with his eyes then blinks to select it. After he composes a word, a male Siri-like voice speaks it for him. It's slow and imperfect and usually it works. But not lately. Not since one of his caregivers (Mike has several) accidentally scratched his left cornea while dressing him. Because of the disease, his blinks are no longer rapid and reflexive but perilously slow, leaving his eyes vulnerable, and when the caretaker pulled his shirt over his head, the collar got him. Now the machine isn't calibrating right and they must rely on their number and letter system of communication, their "paper" system as they call it, because it's written on laminated pieces of paper that hang everywhere—in the shower, in the



NICOLE AND MIKE, IN ZACH'S GARAGE, GETTING READY TO RIDE.



ZACH YENDRA, WITH HIS 1968 FORD COUNTRY SEDAN WAGON, IN LAPORTE, COLORADO.

kitchen, on the window of their wheelchair-accessible van. When technology fails or is unavailable—or a cornea gets scratched—it is their only means of communication beyond one blink for "yes" or two blinks for "no."

But Mike can still trigger certain areas on the tablet's keyboard, like the box that initiates the harsh, pulsing alarm he's now using to get Nicole's attention.

"What do you need, babe?" Again, she patiently recites the numbers and the letters. When he blinks once for 'm' and once for 'o,' she stops.

"Mouth?"

One blink.

"Okay." She inserts a Yankauer—a long, thin suction instrument similar to what the dentist uses—in his mouth and each nostril and suctions them out.

It's 7:50 on a Saturday morning in mid-January and today is a big day. Zach is driving down from Fort Collins with the Bootlegger. Barry is coming over. So are the neighborhood guys. They're going for a ride.

But first Mike must spend these 30 minutes having the mucus shaken and sucked from his lungs. Then his caretaker will fit him in the sling that will lift him by his armpits and

knees and take him into the shower. He'll hang like that, quads to stomach, uncomfortable as hell, as the caretaker pulls packing material from inside the pressure ulcers on his backside and rinses the wounds. Next, she'll lower him onto his shower chair and wash him. Then Nicole will be home from the chiropractor, and will treat the hole in the arch on his left foot where the skin graft didn't take. The skin graft that was the result of the caretaker who put his foot in a tub of Epsom salts and scalding water and missed Mike blinking as hard as he could as he sat through third- and fourth-degree burns.

After that, he'll go back up in the sling so his wounds can be washed again, repacked and re-bandaged. The trash can in the bathroom will slowly fill up with gauze, wipes, plastic, and adhesive backings. Then they'll dress the guy who used to nail the rockabilly look—slicked back hair, long sideburns, English Laundry and Ike Behar dress shirts—in sweatpants, a long-sleeve T-shirt, and untied silver Nikes. Nicole will give him stomach meds, a probiotic, and a blood thinner through his feeding tube.

Four hours and 21 minutes later, Mike will be ready to ride.

Zach Yendra was used to fielding crazy requests, but nothing like the email he got on April 17, 2016. He read through it again. *I'm the president of the Death Ride Tour, a charity cycling event to support the fight against ALS. I have a friend with ALS who would like to join our tour this year and we need to build him a custom bike similar to the Bootlegger.*

The email was from a guy named Barry and he'd sent it at 5 a.m., just hours after leaving a voicemail the night before. Zach

shook his head. *Who is this guy?*

It really wasn't a great time. He was slammed. Zach, now 33, owned his own company, Yendrabuilt, in Fort Collins, and he and his small team did interior design and built custom furniture for breweries and bars. The work was satisfying—he loved designing and building stuff—but it was a constant headache, too, managing multiple projects and always looking for the big job.

Still, it was an intriguing crazy request. He loved bikes. Growing up in Lincoln, Nebraska, he'd ridden just about everything since he was a kid. He'd done some mountain bike racing, but competing wasn't his thing. Epic gravel rides with insane climbs were more his speed. He'd worked for a local framebuilder before starting Yendrabuilt, and was known around town as the guy who built funky, functional bikes—an adult-size Big Wheel, an eight-person “pedal jeep bus,” the Bootlegger.

Zach built the original Bootlegger in 2011 for a buddy who owned a bar and wanted a bike that could transport kegs. It took him six months to design and build the three-wheeled cargo bike that could carry two barrels. The first model wasn't even finished before he started designing the bike's second iteration, which would have an electric assist. He wanted this model—what he started calling the Bootlegger Prototype—to be even stronger, faster, more bombproof.

His bar for success was high and elusive: Build a bike that could handle 200 pounds in the cargo bay, was fun to ride, and could keep up with his friends on 100-milers in the mountains. Such an uber functional, shreddable bike—and many of the components required to power it—didn't yet exist. To get what he wanted, Zach and his father, Carl, a machinist, had to invent their own suspension and steering system and machine their own dropouts. Zach invited his buddies to his shop for “shred tests”—they'd send the Bootlegger over plywood ramps and corner it so hard the inside front wheel would go airborne more than a foot off the ground. They'd ride it off road and on the snow and off curbs and skid it out and flip it over and just try to break it. And every time they did, Zach figured out what failed and made it stronger until he'd finally built a bombproof bike that absolutely rips.

This was the bike this Barry guy was talking about in the email he'd sent at the crack of dawn. The Prototype that had taken Zach five years—and more than \$100,000 in time

and parts—to build. The bike Barry wanted to replicate in less than two months, for a guy with ALS.

Again Zach wondered, *Who is this guy?*

Barry had found Zach through amazing dumb luck.

Now 65, Barry Sopinsky had started the 235-mile Death Ride Tour in 2009 as a fundraiser for ALS, and as a way to honor his own father who had died at the age of 44 from the disease. He'd read about the Death Ride (so named because it was meant to be done in a single day) in a book, adapted the route, and made it a three-day event that starts and ends in Silverton, Colorado, every June. (In 2017, he added a new one-day version of the ride, called the Death Ride Challenge.)

Barry had met Mike Cimbura in early 2015, just months after Mike's ALS diagnosis when he could still walk and talk. Barry invited him to speak at that year's ride. He'd recently heard from Mike, who—despite being on full life support—wanted to participate in the 2016 ride. If Barry could help him find him a bike.

Barry had no idea where to start. He couldn't envision the type of bike that might work. But he was persistent. He talked to everyone about Mike. One night, he was talking about Mike at a brewery in Denver, when the owner pointed to the bar, said a guy named Zach had made it, then pulled up a picture of the Bootlegger on his phone. He showed it to Barry. The sky-blue bike had two 26-inch wheels with 4-inch cruiser tires

on the phone. He clarified what he was looking for: a bike that could safely carry a guy on full life support for three days over five mountain passes and 16,500 feet of climbing. The Bootlegger was perfect. He just knew it. “We're doing this!”

Zach listened, incredulous. His first thought was, *No way*. He knew nothing about ALS, nothing about being responsible for someone on life support. He had his business and a one-year-old daughter and plenty of deadlines to deal with already.

But his second thought was this: *How far can I push the Bootlegger?*

Zach did not tell Barry yes.

He had to meet Mike first. He had to make sure they were a good match—did they have the same riding style? He had to talk to the people who cared for him—was a ride like this even possible from their point of view? If they were a good match and the ride was actually possible, would Mike even fit in the Bootlegger's cargo bay?

So on a sunny afternoon in May, less than one month before the start of the 2016 Death Ride Tour, Mike, his father John, and father-in-law Rudy made the 90-minute drive north from Mike's home just outside Denver to Zach's shop in Fort Collins.

Zach watched as their silver van pulled up to the open bay doors of his shop. After John and Rudy slowly lowered Mike and his wheelchair from the lift-equipped vehicle, Zach walked over to introduce himself. He thought he knew what to expect, but see-

**HE CLARIFIED WHAT HE WAS LOOKING FOR:
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on either side of the U-shaped cargo bay in the front, and a giant 36-inch wheel with a 2.5-inch tire in the back.

“Holy shit, this could work,” Barry said. He called Zach that night, left a message, then followed up with that email.

Now, three days later, he finally had Zach

ing Mike jarred him. He was so fragile. An inert body in a chair sustained by tubes and accompanied by the constant whoosh of a machine doing the work that lungs used to do. It was startling and he knew his initial hello sounded awkward. Still, he was determined to get to know | CONTINUED ON P. 76

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this man as more than a body in a chair.

He had rolled the Bootlegger outside the shop so they could all see it and right away he knew “the dads,” as he calls them, were impressed. The older men marveled over the fabrication and the machining and the suspension. Then the dads began to talk about Mike as a cyclist and a racer and Zach was relieved to learn they shared the same all-in, zero-fear riding style. But it was what they told him next that caught him off guard. The dads had noticed Zach’s other passion project, his collection of cars and trucks parked outside the shop: his gold and tan lowrider 1964 Chevy Bel Air, his 1968 Ford station wagon custom painted with his business info, his burly two-toned 1977 Bronco. Mike had been a gearhead, too. He’d bought a used Harley-Davidson motorcycle and rebuilt the entire thing. Before he’d gotten sick, he and his father had been renovating a 1950s pickup truck for Mike’s oldest daughter, Seide.

“You just don’t meet a lot of gearheads who are also into riding bikes, it’s like a special brotherhood of dudes who are into everything,” says Zach, who is quick to laugh and often wears his long hair pulled back in a ponytail. “I thought, *This could be me in 15 years*. I had a one-year-old daughter and he had three kids and it was like, seriously, this could be me. A guy with projects and hobbies who loves the outdoors and working on old cars. This could happen at the height of my life, boom, suddenly I have ALS. So at that point, I was like, we’re doing this. I don’t know how, but we’re going to figure it out.”

He did not have long. The ride was less than four weeks away. Building a new Bootlegger was out of the question so the Prototype would have to be modified to safely carry a man who could not shift his weight or hold up his head and relied on a battery to breathe. Zach rushed the three men through a tour of his shop, making a path for Mike’s wheelchair through the maze of extension cords on the floor, and brought them into his office. He started taking Mike’s measurements—his height, his leg length, the width of his shoulders and hips. Within hours of meeting him, he was manhandling the guy.

“I guess I got comfortable with him real quick as I’m measuring his body and he can’t do anything to resist,” says Zach. “But I wasn’t afraid to just jump right in, and I think Mike appreciates that and respects that. It’s what I had to do, so I did it.”

After Mike and the dads left, Zach and Carl got to work. Their task: build a strong, safe, and modular frame that could hold Mike and be easily removed in an emergency. They designed and

welded an aluminum frame that attached to the cargo bay with just four bolts. They got a race car seat with a five-point harness and built a custom footrest. The seat and the headrest and footrest all had to conform with Mike’s measurements and the angles adjusted to hold his body in the most comfortable position possible.

It was supremely complicated and there was no time for a test drive. The day before the ride, Zach got up at 5 in the morning and spent four hours welding the footrest to the Bootlegger. Then he packed everything up in his “party bus,” a converted blue and orange school bus with a giant bike rack on the roof, and he and his parents, wife, and daughter drove seven hours to Silverton.

IT WAS 8 A.M., TIME FOR THE 2016

Death Ride Tour to start, and they were nowhere near ready to roll. Barry looked over at the scene around the Bootlegger. Mike’s crew was gathered around him and Zach and the bike on the sidewalk in front of the historic Wyman Hotel in Silverton. It had taken four people to transfer Mike into the Bootlegger, two holding his body, and two guiding the tubes and hoses that kept him alive. Zach was crouched at Mike’s feet, tweaking the angle of the footrest. Nicole and one of Mike’s caretakers were adjusting Mike’s body and securing his breathing tube. Periodically, Zach told everyone to stand back, apologized to Mike, then gave the Bootlegger a vigorous shake to mimic harsh roads. He had to see where everything—including Mike—would land. Would the joints in the ventilator hose stay connected? Did anything drift toward the spokes? Did the medical equipment below the seat shift? Everything was checked, adjusted, and rechecked. They’d been at it for nearly two hours.

Barry turned toward the roughly 130 riders assembled in the street. He always started his ride on time and as much as he wished they could all roll out together, it wasn’t going to happen. Plus, it was chilly. The tiny mining town of Silverton sits at just over 9,000 feet and most of the riders wore arm warmers. They had a long day ahead of them, a hilly, 70.3-mile ride to Telluride. Barry walked to the front of the group, thanked them for riding, and sent them off. A few riders tried to convince him to leave Mike and Zach and the small crew of riders who were Mike’s neighbors and friends. *They’ll catch up*, they told him.

Barry shook his head. “This right here,” he said, gesturing toward Mike, “is what this ride is all about.”

It took another hour to get Mike and his medical equipment situated in the bike and the

tire pressure and shocks adjusted for the added weight. Nicole, dressed in capris and black flip-flops, was doing her best to not look as nervous as she felt. Mike’s six friends—all kitted up and leaning on their bikes—didn’t mind waiting, they would wait all day if they had to, but they were feeling increasingly anxious, too. They didn’t know Zach. Didn’t know what kind of rider he was. They knew nothing about the Bootlegger. The ride featured mountain passes with 1,000-foot drops and hairpin turns and weather that could get real bad real fast. Mike Besser didn’t think Mike would last much longer than 10, maybe 15 minutes at a stretch. Chris Baker didn’t think Zach should go over five miles an hour.

“I said to him, ‘If Mike gets tired you should probably stop, and going downhill there are some big drop-offs and he’s probably going to get scared. We’ll be there for you, whatever you need,’” says Baker, 54. “He just looked at me and nodded.”

Finally, they were ready. Zach, in a pink helmet and a man bun, and Mike in a white jersey and covered by a white blanket, led the group in a brisk rollout from town then hit the gas and eventually dropped every last one of them. He might have had a 750-watt motor beneath him, but lean, 6-foot-4 Zach pedaled as hard as he could to preserve the bike’s batteries. Their families followed in support vehicles—Nicole in the van, Zach’s dad and Seide in the party bus.

Over the next three days the only things that slowed them down were weather (always unpredictable in the mountains), dead batteries (both on the Bootlegger’s motor and Mike’s ventilator), and stops to tend to Mike. Rain coincided with dead batteries toward the end of day one. Hail hit them halfway through day two. When it started to sleet on day three, they wrapped Mike in blankets, poked a hole in a garbage bag for his head, pulled it over him, and finished the day. They stopped at least once an hour so Nicole could stretch Mike out, suction him, or change the battery in his vent. The weather didn’t bother Zach, who was working too hard to ever get cold, but the stops often made him brutally stiff.

When they were riding, though, things were always good. Zach blared the Cramps or Metallica or whatever else Mike had picked for the playlist, and if he saw something cool like a dune buggy, he’d point it out to Mike and when they were ripping down descents he’d narrate what he was doing and laugh about using Mike as a draft.

And all day long, for three bitterly cold days, they all checked in with Mike.

“Are you doing ok?”

The Beast, the Bootlegger, and the Death Ride

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One blink. Yes.
“Are you cold?”
Two blinks. No.
“Do you want to stop?”
Two blinks.

THE RIDE WAS NOT COMFORTABLE. ALL those hours in the same position. The pressure ulcers that had started the month before after a brief hospital stay got worse and worse (months

later, they nearly killed him when they went septic). But Mike didn’t care. Time in the saddle was worth all of it. It gave him so much. An escape. His identity. A platform.

There is so much he and Nicole want people to know about the Beast: the realities, challenges, and financial miseries. Mike’s care costs more than Nicole makes in a year and they do not qualify for Medicaid. His caretakers are paid out of a trust set up by family and friends, a trust that

at press time, held enough for only two to three more months. They want people to know how underfunded the research is. They want federal approval for Right to Try legislation so that terminally ill people have access to drugs still in clinical trials. They want to raise money toward building a Denver-based residence for people with neurodegenerative diseases, that offers the best technology and care. Their dream is to ride across the country—from *The Ellen Show* in Los Angeles to the *Today Show* in New York City, hopefully next year—to support these efforts. If Mike is riding he is drawing attention, and if he draws attention, he can create awareness. If he creates awareness, perhaps there can be change.

So they returned to the Death Ride Tour in 2017. This time, they put a seat in the Bootlegger that helped alleviate pressure points and protect Mike’s fragile skin. A new headrest accommodated a full-face helmet and better secured Mike’s head. The helmet was new, too. Mike had gone without one the year before and Zach had worried endlessly about keeping his head stable. Mike hated the helmet. The thing he missed most about riding was the wind on his face.

Zach got it. He got a lot about Mike. He understood that no matter how much pain the guy was in, it was better than lying in a bed staring at a screen. He knew that the worst part of the ride for him was the end. It was the worst part for him, too.

IT’S JUST AFTER 2 P.M. WHEN NICOLE wheels Mike out of their house and down the ramp from the front door. It’s overcast and 50 degrees and Nicole has draped a heavy black coat over him. She backs his wheelchair into the garage, out of the wind, and faces him toward the street.

Who he was—who he is—is all around him. On the wall behind him hang cyclocross, road, and mountain bikes. Hanging to his right is the first bike he ever built, a paint splatter blue Stan Johnson; below that, a yellow Schwinn Stingray. To his left, tool belts droop from a hook next to a black motorcycle helmet. Beneath them are snowboards and skis and his beloved blue Harley with the white racing stripe. It’s dusty and crammed behind a bed frame and plastic storage bins and the metal tower that is his tool box. Standing before him on the driveway are his fellow Death Riders: Chris Baker, Mike Besser, Glenn Levi, Scott Lawson, and Barry.

Before Nicole and Zach put Mike in the Bootlegger, they unbolt the seat from the cargo bay, slide it forward, attach Mike’s ventilator to the back of the seat, then slide it back and rebolt it. Together they are efficient, practiced.

Nicole was a wreck before that first Death

Ride. She didn’t know Zach. She duct taped every joint in Mike’s ventilator tube because she couldn’t be sure Zach would respond fast enough if the alarm went off. She thought Mike was going to die and so she drove every inch of the route behind them. The second ride, there was no duct tape. She didn’t see the two of them tear down Red Mountain Pass (and she’s kind of glad) because she wasn’t behind them every second. Zach has become one of the reasons that Nicole still uses the word “blessed.” When he is around, she can relax. She can laugh.

Nicole turns to Zach. “All right, ready to transfer?”

She turns to Mike. He’s trying to say something.

“1...2...3...K...L...M...M? 1...A...what do you need?” She runs again through the series but she’s stumped. The seconds tick by. The neighborhood guys debate the route. Chris wants to hit the trails, Glenn and Mike want to head toward Mountain Vista on the nice wide shoulder. The rhythmic whoosh of Mike’s ventilator is always in the background. “N is correct? No headrest? Is it head? Is H-E-A correct?”

“Helmet?” says Zach. Three minutes and 19 seconds have passed.

“No helmet?” says Nicole, her eyes locked on Mike’s.

One blink.

IT’S NOW 3:30. AFTER ADJUSTING FOR the vent, the headrest on the Bootlegger needed to be swapped out. Then the harness wasn’t fitting right with all of Mike’s layers. Eight hours after Mike’s day began, he and Zach head out of the driveway. They roll out slowly, and one of the guys jokingly asks why Zach and Mike don’t go that speed during the Death Ride.

As they turn out of the neighborhood they start up the false flat and rollers of Wildcat Parkway. The group begins to string out. Zach, wearing a bright orange helmet and blue New Balance running shoes, begins to pull away.

Before Mike, Zach was the guy who didn’t do charity events, didn’t much care for packs of riders in matching kits and “plastic bikes,” or get why anyone needed a “reason” to ride. On the rare occasions he did do organized rides, he was the guy on the 1990 fuschia-pink Bruce Gordon with the wraparound handlebar, a six-pack in the panniers, and a Pabst Blue Ribbon in the bottle cage.

But he gets those charity riders now. And he thinks every such ride should have a Mike and a Bootlegger. A rider who reminds all the others why they are riding. A rider who is their reason. He will joke later, after today’s outing, that the Death Ride was the first time he ever did

anything nice for anybody. But then he will get serious. “I know this has made me a better person,” he will say. “To have someone trust their life with you, and you can show them a damn good time and let them go real fast and do something that nobody else can do for them is pretty cool. I feel like I’m done, I don’t have to live anymore because I’ve made someone’s wildest dreams come true.”

And that is why he took turns at 50 miles an

hour down Red Mountain Pass on that brilliant sunny day last June. And that is why he is pulling away from the group today, his helmet a small bright dot against the gray sky. He is giving the ride back to Mike. He is giving him what the Beast tried to take away. **B**

To contribute to the Cimbura family trust that pays for Mike’s care, visit gofundme.com/mikecimbura.