

## STREET DREAMS PROJECT

**Who:** Alex Petrou

**What:** An attempt to cycle 5000kms. across the USA, unsupported and homeless

**When:** September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011 – November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011

**Why:** To raise funds for Ladder and Stand Up For Kids, and to raise further awareness for youth homelessness

### The Arrival

I arrived in Los Angeles at 3:55pm on September the 11th, a strange day to arrive I am sure, and you can be absolutely certain, airport security was tight. This contributed to the time it took for me and my good mate Billy to leave the airport. The positive, however, was that we made use of the time in the car to have a good old chin wag about life since we last caught up in person.

It was funny to see how our lives differed; Billy was now married, had finished his university degree and was working in a great role as a mechanical engineer, and he seemed settled, content and focused. Then there was me, recently single, an unfinished degree --- one I had changed 4 times, and almost nomadic in my movements, eek, time to be worried? Nonsense, I was as stable as they come, a real catch, I thought. I mean, who wouldn't want to shack up with me in my sleeping bag, head to the occasional Laundromat to collect lint from the dryers, and skip through shopping centre's smiling like I was 6 years old? Pfft, way too serious, think about it later, Al.

Anyway, when we arrived back at Billy's pad, I was fortunate enough to meet his lovely wife --- an absolute sweetheart in fact, Liz. On top of that, I got a little bit spoilt by their two pet dogs/mini human beings, Che and Coco.

For the next few days, I spent time with Billy and Liz. We went hiking up the mountains of Santa Monica in between work for [Seed of Thought](#) and me trying to organise some sponsorship for the [Street Dreams Project](#). When the time came for me to leave, it appeared that my sponsor for camping equipment had gone into hiding, so I was left to organise this for myself, just another expense I wasn't ready for.

Now some of you may be sitting there thinking, wow, way to be organised Al, you big hot shot (sarcastically, of course), yeah, I got you! Here's a quick insight which you may not have been aware of. Originally, we had an organisation we had partnered with in the USA for the Street Dreams Project. The role of this organisation was to assist me with a bike, chase vehicle, and planning my route. As simple as it sounds, two weeks before I was due to leave for the USA, one of the directors of this organisation emailed me and withdrew from the project. It seems they did a risk assessment and realized that in no way were they organised. It was hard to not take this personally, but within twenty-four hours, we had secured another partner in the USA, [Stand Up for Kids](#), which, I was absolutely chuffed about. So, with that loovveerrlllyyy bit of information, I am sure you can see why things were seemingly a little disorganised and chaotic. On the 14th of September, my due date of departure, I was not fully prepared. I spoke to my partners back in

Australia and we all agreed that although I was cutting it tight, I should not set off until I was organised. So back to work it was, and a few more days with Bill and Liz.

By Sunday, I was ready to go, but it was now the 18th of September, meaning, I was behind by 4 days already. I had picked up my bike 3 days earlier from a great little store called Topanga Creek Bicycles. Chris (Store Owner), a fantastic guy, really looked after me and I felt like the Surly Long Haul Trucker he recommended was going to be the perfect set up for this project --- although I was slightly concerned about the Brooks Leather Seat, I mean, who wants to sit on a leather seat? It sounded uncomfortable as ever, but, Chris was the professional and due to the fact I had never actually road cycled before, I thought it would be best to listen to someone with experience. 😊

In the early evening, Bill and Liz dropped me off just outside of L.A as the traffic was horribly busy. Earlier in the week, I had spoken with Paul from Tour d'Afrique, who specialised in cross country cycling adventures. I was so inspired by what they did. I contacted Paul, and asked if they would be interested in sponsoring my journey by providing me with a route as far as St. Louis. Paul didn't hesitate and after some terms were agreed to, he asked me to make my way to Twenty-Nine Palms, where the route would begin. No worries I thought, bring it on Cali...

## **DAY 1 – Lift Offffff!**

Well, here I was, finally ready to cycle across the USA. What was running through my head, I can't tell you, I think it was something like, Oh Al, what have you got yourself in to this time? Ha!

In truth, I was nervous about the kind of reach the project would have after so many hiccups. The Street Dreams Project was such a diverse one that my team and I were proud of. Our primary goal was to raise funds for Ladder and Stand Up for Kids and awareness of youth homelessness. Secondary to this was the fact that we wanted to continue to inspire people to challenge their own personal limits, and be more socially responsible.

The more I thought about our goals, as I climbed my first small incline on my way to Banning, the more it upset me --- Christ, I was getting emotional already! Every night, there are thousands of kids sleeping on the street, uncertain and afraid; there is no way any child deserves to have a life like that. How can we, as a race, place so much emphasis on certain things and be ignorant of others. It seems that the more one observes the society he or she lives in, the easier it is to see the injustices surrounding us every day, yet we fail to act. Right now I would say, after reading that last sentence, that there are a few people pointing fingers, mumbling things like government, financial institutions, media, they make us do it, life is hard.. blah, blah, blah.... Well, here is your 5am wake up call, the buck starts with you, the sooner you change your inner attitude to reflect your outer actions, the sooner you will realize, you're not a victim and that people created these problems, so naturally people are the solution.

Back to my ride, I was struggling after a few hours. My butt was sore, my legs were hurting and all in all, I was pretty exhausted. To top it off, after 5 hours, I got my first flat tyre, awesome! As I sat down on the side of the road with my little headlight on, I had my first little tantrum and I called Billy and Liz to have a spit. I felt much better after talking to them and once my tyre was fixed, I powered on into Banning. Arriving in Banning was nice, I felt good, my first leg had been completed... then where to sleep? I went to Wal-Mart at 1am to pick up a PowerAde and some dry snacks. I then went down to a local park and sat on a park bench...this turned in to a lay down, and then I dozed off for a wee second before a security guard told me to move on. In a slightly agitated voice I asked him, "Where are you sleeping tonight, mate," he just looked at me and then replied, "At my house", "Yeah," I replied "Must be nice to have a house, what about those people who don't have houses, huh?" ...Oh man, this was funny, after a short conversation the security guard told me there probably weren't any places I could sleep so I would have to get a motel.

At 3am, I cycled down to a budget motel and checked in. The young lad who served me was of Indian descent and he was quite excited about my bike. "Where are you going? Where did you start? How far did you go tonight? Where is your next stop?" Chill my man, I thought, I just want to have a shower and get some sleep. When I got to my room, I showered, then sat on my bed and laughed at my evening, particularly my attitude towards the security guard, quite a poor effort I thought --- ah well, I will work on it over the next 50 days, lights out.

## **DAY 2 – Reality Check, Testing... Testing... 1, 2, 3**

I was up at 10am getting ready to check out. Packing my gear, I had a quick thought to cycle back to L.A, it's only 50 miles Al...what do you reckon, go on! That's not going to happen Al Jnr, now back in your box until next time I feel like giving up.

Once I checked out, I cycled down to McDonald's and picked up a double quarter pounder meal. One of the coolest things about doing these kinds of adventures is that you can eat what you want and not even an ounce of guilt filters through to your conscience. In fact, your conscience is the mascot for unhealthy habits, he stands there, waves his little pompoms, actually it's a she... she stands there in her tight bikini, waves at you, flashes a quick smile then turns around to shake her extremely toned glutes in your face, you can't help but drool as you stuff your face with greasy, oily food, woof!

While I was in my little fantasy world, I managed to look over my route for the day. It consisted of a hell of a lot of riding --- reality check number one! My destination was Twenty-Nine Palms, the road seemed OK for the most part until a 15-mile climb, followed by another 30 miles of small ups and downs. I had managed to organise a couch to surf on for the night through couchsurfing.com. John, the guy I was meant to stay with called and was extremely polite and

helpful. My plan was to be in Twenty-Nine Palms by around 9pm, and then get a good night's and day's rest before taking on the desert!

In short, this did not happen --- reality check number two! I got lost coming out of Banning and then had to ride on this ridiculous gravel road for miles until Google maps took me to a dirt road that apparently led to another highway. By this time, it was 2pm and stinking hot. I threw my bike on the ground and told myself it was lunchtime, afternoon tea time, late breakfast time and pre-dinner time all at once, that way I figured I could take as long as I wanted, pfft, where was my little conscience cheerleader now!

After 40 minutes, I got up and started cycling again. I kept looking out for the mountain I was supposed to climb but it was not in sight. All I could see was long, hot road of desert. When I got to a small town called Palm Springs, I stopped in at the information centre. When I went in, I was drenched with sweat, the lady at the front desk looked at me strangely as I asked her how far it was to Twenty-Nine Palms. I should have known from the look on her face...yep, Google maps you little bas\*ard, no wonder you're in Beta! I had cycled 20 miles off route, the result of this was that I now had to cycle the extra 20 miles and then up the massive incline...and then another 30 odd miles, YAY!

I immediately called John and advised him of what had happened; he was so cool about it and asked me what I ate food wise so he could prepare something for me when I got in. Once off the phone, I threw my bike on the ground (again), which didn't make me feel any better. I then got back on my bike and cycled to the turnoff and up the mountain to Twenty-Nine Palms.

This mountain sucked big time and it was about half way up that I decided that the camelback I had on was weighing me down --- so I drop kicked it over the side of the mountain, and then, like a small child who had just watched Rocky for the first time --- I did a victory dance, prancing around on the side of the road, singing Eye of the Tiger and shadow boxing, "take that you stupid heavy backpack, the one who has made my whole trip (two days) a living hell, you made the sun hot all day, you made the gravel hard to ride over, yeah, it's all your fault I went the wrong way, be gone with you!"

Another two miles down the road I realised my knife was in the front pocket and a few other things, I turned around and it was far too long to walk back and then far too much of a hike to get it. Well, that just reiterated to me that a moment's anger can often cause one to do stupid irrational things. Note to self Al, it really wasn't the bag's fault, grow yourself a new brain and think about that next time you decide to score a field goal with your backpack --- reality check number 3!

I arrived in Twenty-Nine Palms later than expected. It was around midnight when I called John and he gave me directions for his place. When I got there, he had prepared a pasta and chicken dish which was unbelievably tasty. We conversed a bit over our meal; he was a really cool guy and very intelligent. After about an hour, I took a shower and then went to bed.

### **DAY 3 – If it feels too hard, procrastinate...**

Much to my horror, I woke up at around 8am. I couldn't get back to sleep, so I just stayed on the couch thinking about the previous night's ride and where I was to go next.

Paul was due to send me his route from Twenty-Nine Palms to Flagstaff, I had to pick up some supplies and some new tubes for my bike, plus I was hoping to get some work done on the [Street Dreams Project](#).

When John got up, we had a good chat, then we both set to work doing our own thing for most of the day. At around 3pm, John offered to take me to get supplies. The drive there was fascinating. John was a really interesting character to talk to. I listened as he told me about the American Government, about his life and how he had found a more peaceful way of living. It is people contact like this that I really appreciate.

When John and I could not locate a bike store to get some tubes, he looked on the internet and found a small place called Gypsie Bicycles, so we set off looking for this bike store with a residential address. When we found the location, we walked out the back in to a shed full of bikes, it was awesome. John and I called out and an older bloke yelled out, apparently he was asleep, "Who's there" John and I laughed, "Just trying to get some bike supplies buddy." "How did you find me?" he asked... Ha-ha! Classic, I thought, hide your business in a backyard shed, sleep during business hours then demand to know how we got here. Like hello, I can already see the billboard advertising --- Gypsie Bicycles, we are open (if you can find us) our operating hours are not regular due to midday naps, call first or else, punk!

John and I got talking to this guy; he was super cool actually and was a keen rider who made some awesome bikes. After discussing my incomplete route, he referred me to the Race Across America route (RAAM). He then gave me the number of a young guy (Casey) who had cycled across the USA a few years back who actually lived in Twenty-Nine Palms, what are the odds! John and I walked out laughing, we had only just finished discussing how things don't just happen by chance in life, there are reasons behind them --- here was a perfect example. On the way home, I called Casey and John dropped me at his place. I spoke with Casey for about an hour, he did not outlay a great deal of advice but he was enthusiastic about my journey and asked me to stay in touch.

During the walk back to John's, I felt really relaxed until I got there and realised I had to ride out that night. It was at this point I started moving pretty slow and kind of doing a whole lot of nothing. My next stop was Parker and it was a huge ride, over 110 miles with no water stops for 100 miles and all California desert, yippee! I should also explain that earlier, I had made the decision to cycle at night time due to the heat and distances I had to cover. Tonight would be my first full night.

Once I was finished packing, John and I spoke a little more then he followed me up to the highway. While wishing me off, he told me about some friends he had in Prescott who may be able to host me when I got there (two days time). Spending time with John was good fun and he was extremely supportive which was exactly what I needed this early on in the trip.

The ride to Parker started with a long steady climb. Once I reached the pinnacle of this small hill, I had an awesome downhill which went for about 5 miles. The whole time I did not peddle, I just sat up with my hands in the air and pretended I was on top of the world. For the next 90 miles, I cycled with my lights off, the moon was so bright it was kind of a romantic desert cycle, and for the most part I was sorry I didn't have anyone to share this moment with \*tear.

Anyway, by day break, the romance had faded and my legs were in hell! The sun hit my face and I curled up on my bike like a night riding vampire, ewwww, gross, what is that huge bright thing in my face, make it go away mum! It was at this point, some serious fatigue kicked in and as I rolled in to Vidal Junction, I just wanted to pass out right there and then.

When I walked into the gas station (that was the only thing there anyway), I was greeted by a police officer who was, in my eyes, chatting up the check-out chick. He asked where I was going, "Parker" He replied with, "Oh well, you got another 17 miles, good luck."...Yeah I can fu\*king read you, jerk! Thanks for pointing that out, I thought. He obviously could see my bike leaning on the window and the look of exhaustion on my face, what a prick for pointing out the obvious when I was in such a fragile state. I got back on my bike and started cycling to Parker. For the next hour and a half, I battled myself more than anything. The heat was a factor, but it was mainly Alex vs. Alex until I got into Parker, crossed the bridge and checked in at a Super8 because I felt I deserved it.

When I got to my room, I turned on the shower then sat on the bed. I woke up 45 minutes later with the shower still running, stop procrastinating Al, that was last night --- get in the shower! In 20 minutes time, I was cuddling my pillow dreaming about all the other places I wanted to be!

#### **DAY 4 – There really is hope.**

Due to the fact that I arrived in Parker at around 10am, I slept all day, then woke up and had dinner/breakfast --- I don't know what I would call it as my sleeping pattern was so out of whack! Then I went back to my room and packed my gear.

Leaving late at night always feels strange, I have no idea why, but it doesn't seem normal. Once I was ready to go, I cycled down the street and picked up a breakfast burrito, yum! It was now 1am and my goal was to make it to Salome by morning. The ride felt tough, my legs were still battered from the previous night and I just wasn't feeling it. There was a long climb out of Parker, which did not inspire me and then just pitch black darkness for the remainder of the night.

By 7am, I was feeling a little negative, the sun was coming up, I was hungry and tired and Salome was still 10 odd miles away. On top of all this, I was craving a coke BIGTIME!

I knew I had to be close to a small town or something and sure enough about 30 minutes later, I cycled in to the little town of "Hope". How fitting, I thought, on a morning where I seemed to be cycling backwards (the head wind had picked up) I cycle in to "Hope". Well, what was even

better is that I could see a gas station up ahead, so, not only was I in “Hope” but I was going to get a Coke. Sheer joy flooded through my veins until I reached the gas station, only to find it had been closed for some time, GREAT! To add salt to my emotional wounds, 1 mile up the road, there read a sign “You are now beyond Hope”. Fu\*k... what a joke... I cursed all the way up the hill; I mean seriously, why does a little hill always seem to pop up just before I arrive at my destination?

I battled a tough headwind for 5 miles --- it seemed like 20 before I arrived in Salome. When I was in “Hope” and happy, I had called a guy called Randy, who ran a small motel in Salome. He had offered to lend me his couch for the day to sleep on, and when I peddled in, Randy was standing on the side of the road. He yelled out to me, introduced himself, then sent me down to his place.

Now, Randy was an absolute classic, thick silver moustache and a quality southern accent. Randy had been a roadie for 20 years and worked on tour with guys like Pink Floyd, and The Rolling Stones to name a few. He had a top personality, and everything was “bitchin’”, it made me laugh, even though I was tired. After a brief conversation with Randy, I had a shower, and then went to the local café and ordered pancakes and French toast. Full and exhausted, I stumbled back to Randy’s place and planted myself on his couch for a few hours sleep.

### **DAY 5 – What is yet to come!**

I woke up on Randy’s couch sweating profusely, it was so hot! When I finally sat up and recovered from my head spin, I had a shower and started packing my gear. Once I was done, I sat down again and decided to wait for the heat to subside before I left.

After yet another entertaining conversation with Randy, I set off and got no further than 100 meters --- I wanted to eat before I left. For dinner, I had a hamburger and fries, a Dr. Pepper and a coffee at a great little cafe. That should keep me up and alert, I thought.

I was a little bit nervous today as I knew I had a big mountain to climb, as well as a big distance to cover in order to get to Prescott. My accommodation was already sorted out (John linked me up with that friend of his) so that was one less worry on my hands, all I had to do was ride!

By 3am, I had been cycling for almost 5 hours and I arrived at the base of the climb to Yarnell. I was exhausted and with nowhere to sleep, I pulled out my sleeping bag and sat under a street lamp for 2 hours only to be woken by a handful of bugs walking all over my face. Well, that was enough to get me wide awake, so I packed my gear and cycled in to a local gas station where I ordered a coffee and sat outside staring at the huge shadow I was about to tackle.

When I went inside to order my third coffee --- yep taking my time again, I walked past an older guy who was walking with a funny bounce in his step, almost like he was a wee bit high, “You riding that bike?” he said to me, (no, I am riding another bike that is hidden in an unknown location, that one is just my back up in case a Dinosaur runs off with my real one).. “Yep, sure

am.” I responded and he kept walking. Now, I was a little confused. Firstly, what kind of question was that? Secondly, what kind of question was that! I caught myself almost wishing he said something else, was I that desperate for friends.... maybe.

Anyway, as the old saying goes --- be careful what you wish for. This jolly chap came out and proceeded to tell me about the mountain I was set to climb. “You going up?” he asked, “Like a bird” I replied, “Well.... I will pray for you, I wouldn’t want to be going up... over 6,000 feet... tough climb...I will pray for you...on that bike...geesh, that will be tough”. Yeah okay, I thought, what have I gotten myself into, this nut is going to break me before I even get started!

I thanked him for his kind words of wisdom and walked inside to, oh, look at nothing. I just needed to get this guy’s voice out of my head, what a psychopath! He did, however, help in a way. I noticed him hanging around the gas station spitting his poisonous words of negative venom on anyone with even half an ear, so I got on my bike and blasted off into the distance, determined to get as far away from Corporal Lunatic as possible.

I was probably riding for, oh, maybe 45 minutes before I felt like dying. The incline up to Yarnell was horrible and I was over it! The sun had just started to rise and I was not even half way up. I stopped for 3 snack breaks until finally I crossed over the mountain and had breakfast at a small café at the top. As I sat there, I could not help but think to myself --- that is just a taste of what is yet to come...eek!

Once I finally arrived in Prescott, I dialled Sam (the son of John’s friend) and we met at his place. Sam is quite an interesting and intelligent young bloke who recently finished a stint in the American Military and has a passion for music and writing which really shows. We kicked off our friendship with a philosophical conversation about life, the youth and religious views! Just the way I like it. I was keen to keep chatting but my brain was shutting off so it was time for la la land.

## **Day 6 – I’ve got an idea!**

I woke up in the evening and went downstairs to chat to Sam and meet his roommates. Each introduced themselves. Nathan (Nate) was a solid young lad and as friendly as they come. Christian was equally as friendly and a very talented hip hop artist. I also had the pleasure of meeting Christian’s cousin Josh --- a quiet, well-mannered and supportive young chap and their next door neighbour Paul, an energetic guy who also has a way with his words.

I had a really great evening with these guys, not only were they enthusiastic about life in general, but we also shared similar interests and opinions towards global issues, and the urgent need for our youth to begin taking responsibility for the current state of our society. Day by day, it seems more evident to me that one area our society fails to address is the long term future of our race.

Is it complacency? Meaning, because things probably won’t affect one directly (here and now), they are not concerned about it, or is it that life is so demanding on a daily basis, and we are



under constant social and financial pressures that it is tough to think that far ahead? One could argue on both accounts, but either way the truth is, we need to counterweight our tendency to view the future as only what happens today and tomorrow, with an understanding that the choices we make, and the actions we take, will ultimately affect our future generations for years to come. Easier said than done I am sure.

Anyway, I decided in the early hours of the morning to head back to bed for a few hours. I bounced back up from under the covers mid-morning, ready to ride through to Cottonwood. I cooked up a good breakfast for the lads and as we sat around speaking about my trip, we had a cool idea that they would drive my gear through to Jerome so that I could cycle up Mt. Mingus without a heavy bike --- no doubt, I liked this idea very much.☺ We would then have dinner together before I tracked off.

In the early afternoon, I left Prescott and began my trip. It took only 4 hours to get to my destination. It was absolute heaven riding without the 50 pounds of gear I had; I could not believe how light my bike was! When I got to Jerome, I met up with Sam, Nate, Christian and Josh. I was pumped, but also a little sad. Being on the road by yourself all the time, you do really miss talking to people and these guys were great company. During dinner, we had another great idea --- the guys would take me back to their place for the night, so I could get another good night's sleep and then drop me back in Jerome the next day. This had its pro's and con's, it would mean that I would have to ride through to Flagstaff the next day (much longer than anticipated) but I would be better rested.

Long story short, I ended up back at the apartment and spent the night hanging with Sam, Nate, Christian, Josh and Paul + a few friends --- good times. I then hit the hay after I got a little nervous about my extended and ascending climb through to Flagstaff.

### **Day 7 – Who lies about that!**

I woke up on Day 7 really nervous at the long ride ahead. Paul (from Tour d'Afrique) had told me how difficult the climb up to Flagstaff was and to top it off, I had added more distance to this day. Nevertheless, I kept a smile on my face in front of the lads as they drove me up to Jerome, where I had cycled to the day before.

I unloaded my bike, had a quick chat to Nate, Sam and Christian and then I was off. Descending down Mt. Mingus, I looked at the road that lay ahead and I was not inspired at all --- it was going to be a long day!

I passed through Cottonwood after about 45 minutes, where I grabbed a little bite to eat, okay so I grabbed like 4 hot dogs, I was hungry and I didn't feel like riding! The sun was setting and it was getting quite chilly but I got on my bike and went to work.

A few days before, I had spoken to Paul from Tour d'Afrique and I believe his words went something like this, "man, the climb to Flagstaff is one of your toughest, it is a long climb, it's tough". Yeah, great Paul, can't wait!

As it turns out, Paul is quite the honest man. This climb was hell! It dragged out to the point that I was just physically exhausted and my hands were freezing cold. One thing about cycling at night time is it can really play with your mind, you see weird things and you can also never see where the road ends --- there is no baby light at the end of your tunnel. This made the climb seem so much longer and after 6 hours, I had just about had enough, so I stopped on the side of the road, threw a few fists at the air and dared anyone out there to come out and face me... silence... wait... a few crickets maybe... yeah, that really worked, everyone was scared of me! Bahaha, really AI? Who you talking to? With that reality check, I got back on my bike and finally cycled in to Flagstaff at 2am. Excited, I called Mark, a friend of a friend who was putting me up for the night.

When I finally got through to Mark, it appears he was down at a local bar, a little bit tipsy.

Mark: "Alex, you're riding across the USA",

Me: "That's right Mark, I am",

Mark: "Man, that is so cool you're riding across the USA, do you want to come grab a beer?"

Me: "Thanks Mark, to be honest, mate, I am sore, tired and hungry, can we head back to your place so I can get some rest?"

Mark: "Alex, I can't believe you're riding across the USA, meet me at the pub, let's have a drink."

Me: "Sigh... ok Mark, see you soon."

Long story short, I cycled down to the pub, got refused entry but then talked my way in. Sat at the bar chatting to quite a good looking girl, while in my bike gear, drinking a scotch and Coke with Mark.

We finished our drink and then decided to leave, which made me happy. As we left the bar, Mark met a friend of his, who to be honest was stoned out of his brain. Nevertheless, he joined our mini gang as we walked home.

Now, before we left the bar, Mark told me two things. The first is that there was no food at his house, but that he had a jug that I could boil water with (because I eat hot water). The second is that his house was only 5 blocks away.

After walking for 10 minutes, I stopped and said to Mark and his little shadow, "Mark, this is five blocks, where is your house pal?" Mark giggled to himself, "I was lying about that,

hahahaha”. Ha-ha alright, was he serious right now? I smiled and then I nearly punched him in the face. I mean, c’mon Mark, who lies about that, it’s not even funny!!! :)

Anyway, Mark’s house was around another 5 blocks away. When we got there, he and his friend sat on the couch (my bed) and went to work on some weed. After filling my room with a cloud of smoke, Mark’s gypsie friend left the premises and Mark went upstairs to his room, oh and I got to try to get some rest.

### **Rest Period - 1**

I woke up at 7am. Not by choice, but because Mark ran down the steps like a little kid at Christmas time. “Alex... Alex...,” Mark yelled (or at least it sounded like he was yelling as I was so fragile. “What mate, are you ok?”, “Do you want to get stoned?” he replied, “No thanks Mark, but I appreciate the thought.” He looked sad and walked back upstairs to his room. I almost felt bad, but what kind of response was he expecting --- “Sure thing, Mark, you funny guy, bring down your bong and all your weed, especially the good stuff, then call your friend that looked like he was casing the place last night and we can get well stoned and then take turns dodging trucks on the highway, yippee.”

Enough said, I went back to sleep for about an hour then got up and got some food. As I sat and ate some of the best pancakes I had ever had at a local restaurant, I started laughing so hard! What a night! I was almost in tears, I think the girls thought I was having a fit, which probably looked even worse when I tried to get up --- my legs were so sore I grabbed the table and everything else in sight for support.

Once I got done eating, I went back to Mark’s and grabbed my gear. I wanted to cycle out that night but, on top of being sore, I was also feeling horrible. The previous night’s cycle to Flagstaff (around 7,000 feet above sea level) had given me a bit of a head cold. On top of the fact I had minimal rest, I cycled down town and sat at McDonald’s for a short period. I then went to the Laundromat and did some blogging until the early evening. At around 6:30pm, I went to Panda Express to get some dinner --- purely because it was within 100 meters from where I was at. I went in and ordered my food, then went to sit outside and call a few budget hotels to price a few rooms. By now, my cold was worse and I needed to sleep!

I was just about to start eating when a girl came up to me and asked me where she could find the Barnes and Noble. I told her I had no idea what that even was (sounded like a strip joint to me). Anyway, it turns out this girl (Lindy) was super cool and we got chatting about my ride and why she was in Flagstaff, and once she advised me that Barnes and Noble was a bookstore that offered free wireless, I was on my merry way down there with her to do some work online!

As the night came to a close, again I jumped online to get a budget hotel room. I spoke to Lindy and she was also keen to do so as she had been sleeping in her car since she arrived, so we got moving to the local Econolodge, hired a room (two beds, people) and then sat up for a while chatting.

About midway through our conversation, I received a phone call from John (from Twenty Nine Palms). He had gone out of his way to get me gel tyres, what a legend, and was driving them up all the way from Phoenix! I was inspired; this guy goes above and beyond! Two hours later, John arrived at our hotel with his roommate and I introduced him to Lindy also. He stayed and we had a quick chat and then just like that he was off again.

By that stage, it was near on midnight and Lindy and I were both exhausted, she almost fell asleep typing and I was out like a light. My alarm went off at 10am and I felt like I had been nailed by a truck, my sinuses were blocked and my eyes were sore. Automatically knew there was no way I was riding tomorrow and there was no way I was staying in a hotel again for the evening.

Lindy and I went and picked up some IHOP before she set off to go and visit her friend in Phoenix for a few days, while I made my way back to Barnes and Noble to do more work on the Street Dreams site and continue to try to plan my route.

In the early afternoon, I messaged a couple of guys that the Prescott Soldiers (Nate, Sam, and Christian) had linked me up with in Flagstaff. They were some of their high school friends and suggested I stay with them for a night. Happy that I may have solved my homelessness for another night, I sent a text to the three of them Aaron, Colt and Junior.

I got a hold of Aaron and he told me to cycle around to his place when I was ready. When I arrived, I met Aaron at the door and he introduced me to Colt (Catfish Colt) and Junior (as always every Junior I have met seems to be, well, not so junior, he was an axe!).

These lads were great fun and we stayed up until the early hours of the morning having a good chat. They offered me one of the most comfortable fold-out couches I had ever been on in my life and I think I nearly ate all their cereal (thanks guys!).

In the morning, when it was time to go, I was a bit bummed. I didn't get to hang out with Aaron, Catfish Colt and Junior for longer, but duty called, my cold was horrible and I needed to make up time on the road so off I went through the streets of Flagstaff.

## **Day 8 – Am I even moving?**

Cycling through Flagstaff was tough after a couple of days rest and a terrible head cold. It was surprisingly chilly which wasn't helping my nose, which was dripping like crazy (grosssssss!!!).

A few miles in to my journey, I received a call from my college soccer coach, Bobby Peterson. We had a good ten-minute chat and it was great to hear from him. Coach has always been a really supportive guy and when I got off the phone to him, I was full of energy, so off I went power peddling my way to Tuba City.

I had been cycling for about 3 hours when darkness hit, and what better way to start an evening cycle than flying down a steep decline and hitting road kill, AWESOME! As the seat nailed me in the groin, I couldn't help but gasp for air... At no stage in life will that ever feel good, I thought as I pulled over to change the flat tyre that also resulted from the small body of fur that got in my way.

A few kilometres down the road, I realized that I had left my helmet behind --- such a smart guy I am sometimes. As I continued to ride, I received a text message which got me all excited so I stopped to read it. The news couldn't have been better. Trung, a top guy I met on couchsurfing.com, had offered me a place to stay for the night when I arrived in Tuba City, a nice relief.

Now, I don't know whether it was this news that got me going again but I pushed hard for another 2 hours and I slowed down at a small gas station. I was certain that I only had another 2 hours or so to go. Turns out I was wrong. The total miles I had to cover for the day was 80; I had only cycled 50. At the rate I was now going (average of 11 miles an hour), it was going to be a while before I arrived anywhere --- including on my bike, because I just sat down and had a little tantrum about how I could have possibly timed everything so wrong. Anyway, after 2 coffees, I was off again. I called Trung and told him I was running late, he was great about it, which made me feel more comfortable.

The last 50 miles of today's trek was tough. I honestly felt like I wasn't even moving at all. My legs were shaking, but the real downer was my cold. Riding sucks when you have a head cold and the wind is blowing in your face. I managed to make it in to Tuba City by 12am and when I turned up to Trung's house, I was greeted with a warm and welcoming smile. After a short chat with Trung and a quick meal of rice and chicken, I had a shower and hit the sack.

## **Rest Period - 2**

I woke up the next morning with a headache and what felt like a second brain in my nose! The previous night's ride had obviously taken its toll on my body, and I was aware I was fighting an uphill battle --- well, more so than what I was already facing. 😊

My key priority today was to sit down and put together a route that made the best possible use of time. The riding route I received from Paul at Tour d'Afrique was a little scenic through Arizona and unfortunately, I didn't have the time or the resources to follow it 100%. So with that in mind,

I pulled out my trusty book of state road maps and began mapping my route for the next few days.

What's really frustrating about creating a route this way was that you never know what the upcoming terrain is like. The positive, I thought, is that it gave me a wee little adventure every day, whahooo!

Early in the afternoon, Trung called and asked when I was heading out. I advised him that it would be later tonight as I was going to continue to cycle during the nights until I got in to Colorado. Trung asked me if I would like to come down to his kid's soccer game (Trung coached a young soccer team). I agreed, and was a little excited, partly because I just wanted to get out of the house and feel normal, and partly because I love soccer!

Trung picked me up and we went and watched his team's game. It was awesome; kids playing sport is good fun and can give you a real laugh. It also helps you remember how "not serious" life can be sometimes.

While at the game, I met Trung's lovely wife, Ronda, and we had a good chat. By the time the game had finished, it was dark and my cold had not improved at all. I told Trung and he gave me some medicine, oh did I forget to mention TRUNG WAS A DOCTOR, AWESOME!!! I spoke to Trung and Ronda and asked if they would mind if I stayed another night to shake off my cold and they said they were more than happy to have me. With that in mind, I asked Trung for some advice on my route to Cortez. He helped a great deal and by the end of the evening, my route was complete, at least for the next few days.

The plan was to head through Kayenta and then up to Cortez; the difficulty would be to find a place to stay for the 170 miles between Tuba City and Cortez due to the fact it was all Indian Reservation land and there was also no camping grounds or budget hotels. Anyway, that was a worry for tomorrow I thought, and off I went to bed.

### **Day 9 – Daytime... Night time... Daytime...**

I woke up late in the morning in order to give my body as much rest as possible. I was feeling slightly better, thanks to the cold and flu syrup that Trung had given me the night before. After breakfast, I text Trung and asked him if he wanted to have lunch that day before I left, he agreed and said he would be home at around noon.

I decided just to get myself ready and relax until the early afternoon then kick off around 4pm. After having lunch with Trung and Ronda, I packed my bike and it was time to get going shortly after. I checked my watch and it was 3pm, a little early but what the hell, I thought, time doesn't own me (yeah, good on you Al, the big tough guy that dismisses time!).



## **Day 10 – A bit of nothing...**

I woke up with a sore neck and again, a nice blocked nose, but I was ready to rumble; my motivation was to get to Cortez and go to sleep on a soft surface, booya!

The previous day I spoke to a lovely couple --- Chris and Carrie, who said they would put me on their couch for the night, so again accommodation was all sorted.

It took me a few hours to get in to Cortez and I arrived around 11am. When I got to Chris and Carrie's house, I was exhausted; 17 hours of riding had taken its toll! Chris enquired as to whether or not I would like to go down to the local homeless shelter and help out for a while and as much as I wanted to, I just couldn't. So I grabbed my sleeping bag and went to sleep on their couch.

I woke up in the early afternoon and decided to go for a walk through the town. After a few hours, I grabbed some dinner and then just sat on the grass in a local park and thought about life in general. I was now 10 days in and more alone than ever, I was about to face the toughest week of my cycle --- heading over Lizard's Head and Monarch's Pass (over 11,500 feet) and I wondered if I was ready.

I decided I should get comfortable on the grass despite the freezing conditions, so I lay back and looked at the stars. I was in deep thought about all sorts of things when I realized I was drifting off to sleep (sneaky little eyes, I thought, trying to wear me down then knock me out!), I jumped back up and wandered back to Chris and Carrie's. When I arrived, they were watching TV... and they were laying on my bed. Now I know what you might be thinking, it is their couch --- I am more than aware of that, you crazy animals, let me finish! Not wanting to interrupt their show or their cuddling, I sat at the kitchen table and pretended to work until they went to bed. I hit the sack around 11:30pm, falling asleep to a disturbing thought of me growing wings and flying over the mountains the following day.

## **Day 11 – Did I say dare? I meant BEAR...**

My alarm went off at 7am. When I woke up, I hadn't grown wings and the mountains were still there. I had a big day of cycling today; climbing over Lizard's Head today (11,000 feet) was going to be a tough challenge. I said goodbye to Chris and Carrie as they left for work and then began packing my bike. While I packed, I watched a huge storm start, heading in my direction which I was not enthusiastic about, nevertheless, I did not have time to waste.

I cycled out of Cortez mid-morning and boy, were my legs suffering! It felt like I had never cycled before as I commenced the slow and steady incline up through the mountains. For about 2 hours, I had some nice sunny weather until the rain formed a nice miserable blanket over me. I felt like this was a great opportunity to laugh out loud to myself so I did that, I let out a huge



crazy laugh (so weird) on one of the very few declines for the day. Once I had finished, I started again except this time, I was laughing at my laugh, awesome!!

By late afternoon, I was still 30 miles out from Telluride (my stop) and my legs were shot. I went from crazy laughs to even crazier tantrums. As I stopped in to a small gas station, it was cold and dark now and the batteries for my light were giving up on me. I hadn't reached Lizard's Head yet, so I decided to pack it in for the day. As I cycled around a tiny town (if it had a name, I don't recall it), I bumped in to some locals who told me that camping out was not a good idea. Firstly, because there was a storm coming though and secondly, because there were a number of bear sightings over the past few days.

With that in mind, I found a small motel and got a room for the night. When I got to my room, it was ohhhh, just big enough to fit the bed! So I squeezed my bike in to a corner and had a shower. Once refreshed I was in a bright old mood and very energetic --- don't ask me where that came from! So I walked down the street and found a small restaurant (the only restaurant) and ordered some blueberry ice cream and a hamburger, yeah, my diet was tops!

After I finished eating, I walked back to my accommodation and headed straight to my room. On my way, there were 8-10 people peering outside, so I walked over to see what all the fuss was about. I shuffled my way to the window past all my new friends, and as I looked out the window, well, what have we here... a FREAKIN BEAR! Glad I didn't camp out for the night!

## **Day 12 – Where's your head at!**

It took me about an hour to wake up today; this was partly due to how comfortable the bed was -- in all fairness, anything that wasn't the ground or a Laundromat seemed comfortable, and partly because it was so cold. I packed my bike and checked out late (got in trouble for that one), then went down to my new fave restaurant to have some breakfast. While I was sipping on my freshly brewed cappuccino --- I don't know why Americans call them cappuccino's, they have no chocolate on them, and it is more like instant coffee \*rant, the woman working behind the counter marvelled at my bike, then looked me up and down (which I kind of liked) before saying in her strong accent, "ya know ,there's a snow stawm comin." Ha! Ya got that right, sweetheart, I'm a storm, woof! Obviously, I had been away from society for too long --- storms don't bark!

After my "scrubs" episode, I asked the loveerrlly lady when it was due to hit, then kind of accused her of making it come this way. Who knows, I thought, she could have been responsible. Anyway, the odds of this weather were slim, until I entered the country, apparently. Not only did I still have Lizard's Head to cycle over, I was running from a storm – whahoooo!

Due to the fear of snow --- that white stuff that is basically made up of water (scary stuff)! I jumped on my bike and peddled hard... for 20 minutes, then I went back to my 4 mile-an-hour

standard hike up the mountains. When I reached the top of Lizard's Head, it was freezing, but the view was amazing. The spiralling downhill was equally as inspiring. There were bright yellow leaves flying through the air and pink-coloured trees, I must have stopped at least 5-7 times just to snap a quick photo, thinking each view was better than the last.

All the stopping gave the sneaky little storm time to catch up to me as well, which was great. For my final 2 hours of cycling for the day, I was drenched, freezing and I still had no idea where I was going to sleep. I arrived in Telluride late afternoon and I kind of just peddled from left to right on a bike path wondering what to do next. The town looked extremely small which made me wonder how I was going to find a dry spot to sleep. All of a sudden, out of the blue, a car pulled up in front of me and 'some guy' got out of it and stood in my path. He looked fit and up for a conversation... I was feeling neither --- more liked battered and mute! Anyway, as I cycled up to him, he asked me where I was going, where I had come from and where I was staying, way too much for me to digest... yet, I did it with class.☺ He looked at me and said, 'tonight, you're staying at my place'. I didn't have time to even respond, 'by the way, I am Alex!, nice to meet you Alex, I am Freddy' (glad we got that out of the way, ha!) With that, Freddy gave me directions to his house and drove off!

I followed his directions as best I could and as I cycled past a small school, Freddy was there to meet me. He guided me to his house and showed me where I was staying. What a guy, he put me up in his campervan and told me to have a warm shower. Once I did, I went to his house and met his lovely wife and kids.

For the remainder of the evening, I spoke with Freddy. It turns out he had actually cycled across the USA twice. The last time in 58 days, which was awesome. He gave me some great tips, the best of which came as I complained about the mountains and how it took too long to get up them which made me impatient! Freddy said to me, "you know, you just gotta chill man, take it slow, get in a rhythm and enjoy it." At first, I thought, 'punk I don't want to chill!' I want to hitch a ride with a pterodactyl and fly over the stupid sand castle, but as the night progressed and I went to bed, I thought about what Freddy said and he was right. Not just with cycling, but me in general. My speed seems to always be 100 miles an hour, I can't help it, I want to get things done, and waiting bores me. Ok Al, settle down, time for sleep now --- your head is getting messed up!

### **Day 13 – A warm breath doesn't melt an ice cube.**

I woke up in the morning nice and refreshed and hoping to see that the sky had cleared. As I peeked out the window, there was no such luck, damn! I went over to Freddy's house and he told me it was not a good day to ride and that I should consider taking another day off --- Sorry Freddy, no can do! We had breakfast and then Freddy told me he wanted to take me for a tour of Telluride before I left. We jumped on our bikes and went down to the Gondola, which took us up

the mountain. Now, for those who have never been to Telluride, this place is magnificent, I love it! It is only a small town but it is extremely beautiful, and apparently, in the winter it 'goes off' – in Freddy's words.

Anyway, he showed me around, introduced me to ohhh half of Telluride --- the guy knows everyone, and then we tracked back to his place so Freddy could prepare for his flight to New York and I could prepare for another day in the freezing cold.

Once I was ready, I said goodbye to Freddy and his family, which kind of made me sad. Anyway, back to the important stuff, the weather was literally horrible. It was almost snowing and I had a solid 4-5 miles of downhill, down a road with no shoulder at all. I was concerned, to say the least. As I started peddling, I got a few beeps (not friendly) and then I hit a pace which got me down fast, but got me cold even faster! I was going 60kms. an hour, down a mountain which was heavy with traffic in the freezing cold rain --- in short, I was absolutely shi\*ting myself! By the time I got half-way down, I was frozen and I stopped in to a local gas station to try to warm up.

When I walked in, the shop keeper said hello, then the d\*ck laughed at me, 'a bit cold out there?' No f\*ckwit, it's lovely, I thought to myself. I would like to say I said something along those lines, but sadly I just looked at him and smiled, 'sure is, mate, I am just going to sit inside for a while and abhh chill?' He laughed, so I smirked and then started blowing on my hands, which makes me wonder --- who actually thought of blowing on your hands when you're cold, I mean, it really does nothing. So you do it, you get warm for a second, then you open your hands up and they're twice as cold and you start all over again. Nope, not me, I ain't never doing that blow on your hands sh\*t again, I thought. Ha, what a super mood I was in.

While I was waiting for my hands to regain feeling, I received an exciting call from a lady called Karen who I had emailed on couchsurfing.com. Karen told me that her and her partner Bill had a place for me to stay for the night, what a relief! Now I just had 8 hours of rain, cold wind and mountains to climb to get there, whahoooo! I thanked Karen and she told me to be careful as the roads were very dangerous. I thanked Karen then hung up. That conversation gave me a bit of spark, so I grabbed another coffee, said goodbye to my friend at the register and jumped on my bike. Peddling like a mad man through the rain got me two sore eyes and a mouth full of dirt. Note to self, when cycling through heavy rain, stay as upright as possible to avoid small stones hitting you in the face!

Surprisingly, the rest of the day went pretty smoothly. I took Freddy's advice and remained patient. The real problem was how cold I was, I couldn't stop shaking and I was lucky that I was cycling as I was staying warm. When I was around 10 miles out from Montrose (where Bill and Karen lived), Karen called and her and Bill decided to come for a drive to pick me up as the road was apparently extremely dangerous for around the last 5 miles. When they arrived, I loaded my bike in to Bill's truck, then slipped and smacked my shin as I got in to the back seat --- I love

those great times when you hit your leg or arm or whatever and it doesn't register for a few seconds and then, when it does, the pain just floods through your body and you go weak; this was one of those times. And as Karen and Bill spoke to me, I replied with little 'out of breath answers' because I was too busy rubbing my shin!

Bills and Karen's house was so homely and warm. They were a more mature-aged couple and so interesting. Bill was a midwife and Karen was a nurse --- these guys were lovely. Over a tuna bake dinner, they told me that they met a few months ago, and decided that they knew they were in love so they got married, just like that! Quite a romantic tale really, and I was all too eager to listen.

Once dinner was done, Bill showed me to my room, and he and Karen went to bed. I had a shower and then jumped in to bed. I looked at the bruise on my shin and laughed at how clumsy I was and then I attempted to go to sleep... 1am... 2am... 3am... 4am... finally, I drifted off...

#### **Day 14 – I found the weakest link.**

I woke up at 7am to the sound of Bill's voice. Now, for the record, Bill had a very soothing voice, the kind you would want a midwife to have really. Aaalleexx (husky tone), will you be getting up soon? Now I always have a habit of trying to sound super awake when someone asks me that first thing in the morning, and this morning, regardless of how watery my eyeballs were, I was going to continue this tradition... 'Sure thing, Bill (overly enthusiastic voice), I was already up.' okay relax... I only half lied.

I jumped in the shower and nearly fell asleep, I got dressed and then nearly fell asleep, I even started playing games with myself --- see how long you can keep your eyes closed for, as Bill walks around the house, while still pretending to be wide awake. ☺ So fun!

Anyway, I said goodbye to Karen and then threw my bike in Bill's truck as he dropped me in to Montrose. I had 2 main peaks to climb today which, as Bill explained, would be quite a challenge. Bill dropped me off at a small gas station in Montrose and just like the day before, and the day before that, it was back to team Alex. After a hardy meal of bacon and eggs, I was ready to rock 'n roll. I got going in to a solid headwind which didn't seem to bother me too much. As I cycled up my first peak, I ran in to another rider by the name of Thomas. Thomas was cycling from Denver to Santa Monica and we traded a few road stories. It was cool to meet another guy doing it rough on the road!

After speaking to Thomas for about 20 minutes, I got going again, until disaster struck! I was in the middle of nowhere, cycling up a steep incline when all of a sudden, I slipped at my seat had a solid shot at my left testicle... As my right eyeball began to water, I soldiered on and continued to

peddle only to realize I was going... backwards. WTF! As I looked down at my pedals, what I originally thought was a slip was actually my chain... It had snapped – GREAT!!!

Being that I had never cycled before in my life and that I did not think for one moment that I would need a spare chain, I was in a bit of a pickle. I called Karen but she was only able to provide me with the name of a bike company in Montrose. The problem was that I was so far from Montrose and I was not going to walk back! Nor could I ride! I walked around the mountain for a good 15 minutes until I got enough reception to google bike stores in Montrose. I called one and spoke to their staff who advised me that they would send someone up to bring me a chain, WINNING! All I had to do was stay put.

It took about 20 minutes for my white knight to arrive and when he did, I was relieved. Not only did this guy bring me a bike chain, he also reached in to his car and gave me a beer, ‘thought you might need this,’ he said. I smiled then thought about how wicked another 10 beers would be, and how funny it would be riding drunk. Then I snapped out of this thought trail as I pictured getting hit by a truck!

Anyway, back to reality --- here was my situation. I had about 70 miles to go, it was 1pm by the time my bike was ready to go again, and there was a huge storm brewing on the horizon. At the pace that I could sustain going uphill, there was no way I was going to arrive in Gunnison anytime soon. As I cycled, and cycled and stopped to eat beef jerky, then cycled some more, I finally arrived at a place I could get reception and a young girl called me off couchsurfing.com to offer me a room for the night. Her name was Danielle, and she sounded like an absolute sweetheart. I told Danielle I had a long way to go and I was not wrong. At 7pm, I began cycling through a winding road that would take me in to Gunnison, the street signs said 40 miles and I was bent.

For the next 4 hours, I pushed and suffered, then pushed some more. I was wet and extremely cold and I just wanted to have a warm shower and go to sleep for 2 weeks. When I finally arrived at Danielle’s place, a young woman who was far, far too attractive greeted me. Funny how I was almost ready to cycle over a cliff 2 hours beforehand and now, all of a sudden, I had energy to burn.☺

Danielle took me down to a local Safeway where we purchased some food and then we went back to her place to cook. Not only was this girl good-looking, she was very intelligent, we stayed up until around midnight, and then I hit a wall. I wanted to keep talking to her but my body decided to shut down. So I said good night to Danielle and went to my room in an attempt to get some sleep.

## **Day 15 – It is all or nothing.**

I woke up this morning with a slight feeling of dread. I hadn't slept well and I felt a bit sick and on top of that, I didn't want to look outside to see if it was snowing. I am not sure what it was that concerned me about going through the snow, maybe it was the fact I DIDN'T HAVE SNOW GEAR or maybe it was the fact I was about to cycle over Monarch's Pass, over 12,500 feet. Cycling downhill in the snow in the cold was not just stupid, it was dangerous!

I procrastinated for a short while and then decided that it had to happen. So I packed my bike, checked both my tyres and began cycling. After a short while, it appeared that there was no way I was going to make it over the pass today. I stopped at a local gas station and I was told that they weren't even letting trucks over today; it seemed as though that I was going to lose a day, which I wasn't prepared to do.

For the next 2 hours, I sat at the gas station talking to truckies and drinking coffee. I then met a young guy named Ross. As I spoke to Ross about my journey and trip, he decided we should try to drive over the pass so I could continue to cycle, Ross was certain once I was over the pass, I would be fine. I was game so we threw my bike in the back of his car and started our drive.

When we got to the bottom of Monarch's Pass, the plough trucks were out trying to clear the way and to our surprise, we were allowed to drive over the pass. WINNING! On the way up, I was pretty devastated, I really wanted to overcome this last hurdle, but for my own safety, it wasn't meant to be. Anyway, once Ross and I had got over the pass, we stopped at a small pizza store and ordered a scrumptious wood fire pizza! After chatting with Ross a little longer, I had a look at my road map and tried to decide where to for the evening as it was now close to 5pm.

Well, I was feeling ambitious and I decided I would make it to Pueblo, which was around 160km. I should be there by morning, I thought, and I was told the road flattened out. No worries, I thought, piece of cake --- what an idiot!

I wished Ross safe travels back over the pass and thanked him for assisting me. I was then off like a rocket. The first two hours of my ride was relatively simple, all a slight downhill and I was loving it. Fist pumping the air, screaming out "up yours Colorado", it was this wise guy attitude that assisted me to miss my turn, and which also took me in to a light hail storm AGAIN. I took refuge this time next to a small gas station but I couldn't stop shaking; it was so cold, I had to keep riding. I pulled out my map and finally realized I missed my turn and that I would need to seek an alternative route, so I did it as quick as I could. Once all was confirmed, I was off like a rocket again.

Once I reached my turn, I was in shock, all I could see were huge mountains ahead and I was so disheartened. I started cycling and my pace slowed right down. For over 5 hours, I peddled uphill, my feet had been numb for over 3 hours, to a point that I had to get off and walk my bike

to try to get some feeling back. I was in a bad place and I hadn't seen a person or a car in hours. Finally, I saw some headlights and stood in the middle of the road.

The car had no choice to stop and as it did, I got a glimpse of an absolutely awesome automobile. It was a stretch limousine that a young guy had converted to his mobile home with his smoking hot girlfriend, who lluurrvveedd the fact I had an accent --- I definitely could have used some warming up, but unfortunately this little gem was taken. The pair of travellers wanted a chat and asked me if I wanted a lift. I contemplated, I was so cold and tired and miserable but I declined. They couldn't believe it, these guys kept asking until finally, I firmly stated that I was in this position out of choice. With that, they wished me luck and drive off in to the distance, a decision I later regretted.

About an hour later, I finally got some mobile reception and I found out I still had 20 miles to cycle. I was sooo cold and I had no choice but to keep going. As I cycled, I began to get hit in the face again, I thought it was bugs (again) so I turned off my light only to realize I was getting attacked by snow. It came so quickly but it was brutal and for the next hour and a half, I rode through thick snow which I believe nearly killed me.

It was so bad that by the time I cycled in to town, it was 4am. I couldn't find a place to sleep and I nearly passed out. Just as I lost all hope, the Sheriff drove past me and I waved him down. After a brief conversation, Charles Cox, offered to let me stay at his house. I was so grateful I could have hugged the guy, but I settled for a handshake.

## **Day 16 – Finally, some flat ground!**

I woke up at 7am to the sound of Charles' voice. He had an appointment in town with his wife and we had to leave in around an hour. I had a quick shower and met his angel of a wife, Betty. Charles and Betty were absolutely amazing people, I felt so comfortable around them and we had a magnificent conversation. I found out Charles had spent a long time in the military and he was also an American shooting champion. I could have spoken to Charles and Betty all day!

On the way to Pueblo, we picked up some of their Church friends (Big Tex and his wonderful wife), and Charles told me they were heading to a church group lunch. He asked if I would like to come along and I said sure. When we arrived at the restaurant, I met Charles and Betty's church group and for around an hour, we sat and ate. I spoke to everyone and told them about my journey to date. This group of more mature-aged party were a great audience, they listened intently and I took great joy in educating them on youth homelessness.

Once lunch was done, Charles and Betty invited me to see a movie with the group called Courageous. I agreed and we went to watch the movie. Now, this is not a flick I would have ever selected myself but I am more than glad I went. The duration of the film really got me

thinking about male role models and providing a better example for today's young people, so much that when I walked out of the cinemas I felt so inspired.

After some small talk, I wished my new found church group friends the best, gave Charles and Betty a hug and thanked them for their hospitality. I promised I would stay in touch and then I cycled off to a nearby budget hotel. It was finally my rest day and I intended on using it to... sssllleeeeeeeepppppp!!!

### **Day 17 – Time to recharge.**

Today was the first rest day I had taken in a while and boy, did I need it. I spent most of the day laying around in bed and eating! I also planned my route for the next few days through Kansas.

### **Day 18 – Follow the yellow brick road...**

I cycled out of Pueblo sore and tired. Although I had taken a day's rest, I wasn't quite sure if this was good for me or not! Not to worry, I was out of the snow, heading further away from the mountains and ready to take on the world once again.

About 3 hours in to the day's journey, I realized why everyone I spoke to disliked Kansas. I was constantly on tornado watch (not wanting to visit the Wizard of Oz just yet, unless he gave me a horse with wings to ride!), and the road could not have been any flatter. "Here I go," I thought, spend two weeks hating the mountains and now you've found something new to complain about, ha-ha! I cracked myself up.

On a serious note though, the headwind was not helping and by 6pm, it was getting cold again. I kept peddling but felt like I was going nowhere, fast. When I pulled in to a gas station in the middle of ahh, a town --- the gas station was the town. Imagine, I thought, there is a crew individuals around this area somewhere who hang out at this place like it is the mall, chewing their grass and discussing the philosophy of corn and the nature of soil... oh God, get me back on my bike! After downing a chocolate milk and taking part in a short session of "shiver like you're going to die," I jumped back on the black beast and cruised off in to the night.

By 1am, I was in wonderland. Hungry, tired and a little uncertain where I was, I found a small motel in the middle of Las Animas, and after a bit of convincing, the owners put me up for the night, needless to say I was grateful!!



## Day 19 – Glass half-empty

Boom, up out of bed, boom, a seriously sore butt, boom, found out I had chafe when I stepped in to my hot shower! Nicccccc!!!

Today was going to be a big day, I had set myself the target of getting to Wichita in a few days so I could have a break and go and see my old college friends in Oklahoma. Incentives often get people moving and I hadn't really had one since I started my journey --- besides staying alive. I really needed something fresh, I really needed to see my friends! You see, these journeys can be so exhausting on the mind. You create thoughts which may sound totally rational to you at the time, but upon reflection a few days later, they seem so ridiculous you can't help but congratulate yourself for such an idiotic thought trail. For me, the last few days roamed between wondering why my friends were not trying to contact me, and how the heck I didn't manage to secure a support vehicle. The demons resurfaced and I used them to nail distance for the day; in fact, this was working like a charm and as the hours passed, I was pretty god damn chuffed! Until.....

Until... 8pm that night, I had been riding freely all day. I was able to fight off the cold winds and stay warm, and then out of the blue... bang... flat tyre... so I get off my bike and change it --- flash lightning, I wanted to find somewhere to sleep... not even 20 seconds passes... BANG, second flat tyre, awesome! I get off and change it, faster, I was getting real tired... not even 20 seconds passes... BANG! There goes my last tube. Okay, WHAT THE F\*CK!!! What a test. I threw my bike in to the ground and turned on every light I had and walked over the road. Well, it appears someone forgot to let me know there must have been a bad accident on the road and there was glass everywhere. I looked around for someone to blame, ha! You guessed it, everyone had run away.☺

This was going to be tough, and I would like to tell you something great happened here, but in truth, this nearly ended the Street Dreams Project. For 6 hours, I pumped and peddled? What is that, well, I pumped up my tyre, cycled as far as I could until my tyre was flat, then jumped off my bike and pumped up my tyre again only to repeat the same process. By 3am, I had only made it 20 miles, I could see Garden City, it was close but I was battered. So much that as I nearly swerved in to a car (falling asleep), they must have called the police who pulled me over and asked what I was doing. When I explained to the officers what I was doing, they looked me up online and then listened as I had a nice old vent. They either felt sorry for me or were over listening to me, and offered to drop me at a homeless facility on the outskirts of the city, I was stoked.

5 minutes later, I was wheeling my bike in to the facility. I met the lady on duty who was not so happy with me as we woke her up (but it was a 24-hour facility?). She wouldn't let me bring my bike inside and then told me I had to be out by 6am. Geesshhh, tough gig lady; that meant I had a max of 3 hours sleep. Better than nothing, I thought, and I ran upstairs.

Well, falling asleep proved not so easy as I listened to my roommates toss and turn, one of them with his radio playing, seriously? The mattress I was on was like laying on the top of an umbrella on a scorching hot Far North Queensland day! I was peeling myself off just to change positions. When my alarm went off, I laughed really loud out of frustration and woke my roomies up. We didn't speak, I just walked to the shower and sat in it for 20 minutes with my head in my hands.

As I walked downstairs, I asked if I could wash my clothes and the angel of a woman who was on shift snapped back that I could not, and it was time to leave. I mounted my bike in misery and cycled down the road with a half flat tyre looking for a Laundromat. When I found one, I put my clothes in the washing machine and planned to get an hour's sleep.

Turns out that didn't work either and I spent the next hour catching flies for a little Mexican girl and putting them in a cup for her, as pets. It was so funny it brightened my day. I have always loved to watch how excited kids get over the smallest things, I thought about when I was a kid and how much I loved two things, a soccer ball and going to the local creek to catch yabby's --- oh yerrr, those yabby's feared me☺, then came the PlayStation, then the computer, then the mobile, then Facebook and the story goes on. The saddest thing, I thought, is that future generations are being born in to a society that boasts materialistic possessions as the "norm". What is worse is that life is so demanding on the parents, that they lack the time to educate them otherwise and often yield to their needs. After I banked a few other thoughts in order to revisit them another time, when I was feeling a little more solid, I caught a few more flies for the little girl, walked across the road to a small bike store and picked up two new tubes and whalla! Off again!

After cycling for 2 hours, I was done. I had swerved on to the road twice and I just couldn't keep my eyelids open; it was getting dangerous. I pulled in to the first gas station and got a coffee, hoping it would help me wake up, it didn't. So I went outside and fell asleep against a wall for around 30 minutes before I heard a voice talking to me, "watch out for the antelope". I woke up, huh? I replied, the man repeated himself, 'didn't you see the news, some guy got charged the other day on his bike?' I had no idea what he was talking about but played along, and 10 minutes later, I was telling this friendly guy about my trip. When I advised him that I was about 40 miles behind due to the previous night, he started to get a little bit upset, "I want you to make it," he said to me --- sweet bloke really. I thanked him for his time and then sat back down to get more rest. A few minutes later, my mate returned and told me he was going to get me back on track. I must have looked a bit confused, I asked him what he meant and he told me that he wanted to throw my bike in his truck and drive me the mileage I missed the night before so I had every chance to make it to Washington on time.

I spoke to "the legend" for 10 minutes and told him why I couldn't accept a lift, and he argued with me --- his reasoning was sound. As much as I wanted to say no, I guess in a way I also wanted to give in, so I accepted a lift off him. As soon as I got in the truck, I fell asleep leaning against the window. I woke up a short time later. 'Alex,' I woke up in a bit of a fright, 'where do

you want me to drop you?’ I didn’t think; I just said “here”. So he pulled over and we unloaded my bike. I thanked Sean for his time and then got on my bike feeling a little more refreshed. I cycled in to Wichita at around 10pm in the evening. After pulling up at Wal-Mart, I attempted to sleep near the large bins until I was told to “move along”. Next, I went in to Wal-Mart and tried to find someone to stay with --- after an hour, I was over it and people were looking at me funny. I cycled down the street looking for somewhere to sleep and I just couldn’t. Just after midnight, I pulled up at a dodgy hotel, and I mean dodgy!! I grabbed a room and once unpacked, I fell asleep immediately!

### **Day 20 – And they say human beings are incentive-based!**

My alarm went off bright and early, and then it stopped and didn’t go off again --- apparently, it was too busy on the floor on the other side of the room, so I slept until the early afternoon. When I finally woke up, I panicked for a minute and then started packing my bike. Luckily for me, today was a relatively short day today, for the simple reason that I was going to visit my old college friends in Oklahoma and I couldn’t wait. It felt like I had been on the road for a lifetime, and to see some familiar faces was just the inspiration I needed.

Now, that’s not to say today wasn’t going to be tough. I had 100km. to cycle and only 4 hours maximum to do it before it was dark. Once I had satisfied my stomach, I was off and BOY, the things incentives can do. I’ve always found it funny that when there is something to gain for an individual or group of individuals, the determination to succeed escalates, and we are taught this from such an early age --- do something good and there is a reward at the end, buy a Happy Meal and you get a toy, don’t swim with crocodiles and you continue to live! Today, for me it was cycle your heart out and see people that care about you --- that is all I needed.

In 3 hours, I managed to cover the distance I needed to cover, with a strong tailwind and a burning desire to see my friends, I absolutely shocked myself. When I arrived at my destination, my friend Whitney picked me up approximately 30 minutes later and I was just soooo happy. The drive back to my old college town was entertaining and I felt so relaxed. Knowing that for the next few days I did not have to find a place to stay and that I would have some solid support around me, I couldn’t help but think that this came at just the right time.

### **Rest Period - 3**

The feeling of waking up in a familiar place was overwhelming; I was excited but I also had such a longing to get home and see my family and friends. I spent most of the day thinking, trying to write but to no avail. I imagined that once I was with friends, I would feel comfortable and inspired but today it went the opposite --- I was constantly trying to pull myself out of deep

thought. The thing that hit me hardest was why I started this cycle. Homeless kids, I can't stand the thought. I can't really stand the thought of anyone in pain, period. But kids, so innocent, so fragile and so much to learn --- how can there be over 1.5 million between Australia and the USA sleeping on the streets, being exposed to some of the cruellest forms of life at such a young age. It makes me feel sick, it drives me to do more but it also makes me feel so helpless.

By the late afternoon, and for the next 3 days, I felt much better and I was able to spend some quality time with some of my very best friends. By the time I left Oklahoma, I was re-energized and ready to rock! Time was on my side and I was still on schedule, but I knew that my body was beginning to feel the pressure of a heavy bike and the long timeframes without adequate time off.

### **Day 21 – Winning!**

The morning started quite well as I sat and had a coffee at a local gas station and assessed my route. It was my first day of cycling after a few days' rest and I was in a good headspace. The previous evening, I had also spoken to my good friend and Kokoda Trail companion, Dion Taylor. Dion was excited as he had recently landed in the USA and was overwhelmed with how open and enthusiastic people were about creating social change. We spoke about possible opportunities over here in the future and as a result, my mind was in "thinking mode".

Nothing seemed to bother me today and while I cycled through Nevada towards Weaubleau, I just kind of coasted along. By mid-afternoon, however, I was battling the fiercest headwind I had encountered my entire trip; it was hectic. I could see a storm up ahead and the rollercoaster roads of Missouri left an open invitation for my new-found opponent to slice through my eyes, and cut away at my lips; on top of that, it slowed me down considerably.

So, for the afternoon, it was Alex vs. Headwind. I am more than happy to report in that I was declared the winner at 6:30pm as I made my way in to the town of Weaubleau. "A great warrior you are headwind," I thought, "but today, you have been conquered. I will see you on the battle field... oh, probably tomorrow."

I decided to stop in at the local convenience store/gas station to get some directions and also to gain access to the local phone book. Paul from [Tour d'Afrique](#) had recommended that I get in touch with the local mayor of the town as he was quite a character, so I thought I would do just that and see if this little character could help me out with a place to stay for the evening.

It turns out I got talking to a lovely couple (Larry and Kelly) and after a short while, they offered me their couch for the night. Now, I have said this many times but I do not believe that things just happen, there is always a reason people come in to your life. Larry and Kelly were lovely people and it turns out Kelly used to work in a homeless shelter. We had a great conversation

and they were so accommodating. I was really happy to have met them and I was also grateful that I had a warm place to sleep for the night and access to the shower and cooking facilities.

As the night came to a close, I looked outside only to see a thick wall of rain and insane lightning shooting from every direction. I fell asleep hoping that tomorrow would be a good, dry day, so the wind could have another crack at the title and I could register another win.☺ Yes, right now, I am all about *WINNING!*

## **Day 22 – Sometimes Angels can't hide their wings.**

I woke up at 8am only to see Larry rushing frantically as he was late for an appointment. As we shook hands, he bolted down the front steps and then there were two. Kelly and I had a good chat as I repacked my bags; it was then time to head off. I gave Kel a hug and told her I would call in the next few days, and then I picked up a chocolate milk from the local convenience store and began cycling.

It was a very cold morning and although it was not raining, there was a solid cloud cover, which forced me to wear thick gloves and multiple layers of clothes to keep warm. The road picked up in much the same way as it ended on the previous day, ups, downs and arounds. The up side was that the headwind was not too strong today which made me happy.

By lunchtime, I had covered good ground and I called the Mayor of Osage Beach. I could not get through to her but I did get a hold of a lovely lady by the name of Trina. Trina was so polite and when I advised her of the Street Dreams Project, and that I was looking to find a couch to sleep on for the night, she was all too happy to help.

During the next 3 hours riding, I had no reception and I got caught up in thinking about a few things I had observed recently, and that was the way we put positive incentives in place for our youth in order to achieve results. As a youth worker, I see it every day in my job and having now taken the time to think long and hard about it, I am not sure if we are doing the right thing by our young people. Are we perhaps creating a culture where people only respond to something if they gain a reward of some sort, or benefit in some way? I have noticed, as of late, that people are less willing to spend time listening to others because it offers no benefit, the saying “time is money” comes in to mind, because some associate their time with a price, so to give you some of it is to lose out from the incentive that they gain. To revert back to our younger generations, we also lack a balance, meaning, we have plenty of positive incentives in place but limited negative incentives --- consequences.

Anyway, by 3pm, I finally had reception and I called Trina. This absolute angel of a woman had organized accommodation for me through the Osage Beach Chamber of Commerce, so for the night, I would be spoilt and staying in a hotel.

The last 15 miles were tough as I again faced a ridiculous headwind, but I arrived in Osage Beach before 5pm and met with Trina. She gave me all my details and then I arranged to catch up with herself, her husband Craig and daughter Malissa for dinner.

After a quick shower, Craig picked me up and we met up with Trina and Mal. We had a great conversation about the Street Dreams Project and some of the people I have met on my journey. As I told my tales, I came to the realization that, although I thought to date that my trip had been uneventful, it was in fact the exact opposite. I had so much to speak about. The people I had met to date, the conditions I faced, the mental and physical challenges!

Once we had finished dinner, Trina and Mel took me down to a Body Shop as Trina insisted I got some lavender oil for my knee which was not in a good way. They then dropped me back at my hotel and I told Trina I would give her a call in the morning.

A quick change of clothes and I was off to the Laundromat to wash my clothes. While I was there, a good friend and work colleague of mine, Leland, phoned me. We had a good chat, strangely enough about our youth and ways in which we can be more influential. Leland is also so positive about life in general so I was glad to hear from him after such a tough days riding.

At 10:30pm, I got back to my room and just sat on my bed. I was exhausted and knew I had another big day coming up tomorrow, so I rubbed lavender oil on to my knee and clicked off the lamp hoping to end up in a world of happy dreams.

### **Day 23 – The defining moment...**

Today did not start off well and I knew that it was going to be tough. When I woke up, my knee was swollen and sore, and I felt fatigued. I guess the past few days cycling through Missouri had already given my legs a touch up. The thing that is most difficult about cycling through Missouri is the roads are up and down, and when I say up and down, I am talking grades of around 7-10 percent; they really take their toll when you have a bike that weighs so much, and when these roads go on and on for 70+ miles.

Anyway, I started cycling late as I was waiting for a journalist from Osage Beach to call. He took his time so I decided to hit the road as I was well aware I had around 130kms. to cover. Within 3 minutes of cycling, my knee was giving me hell and I had not really noticed how swollen it was.

As I cycled on to Highway 42, it became apparent that there would be no shoulder for me to cycle on, and I mean no shoulder at all, basically I was cycling with the cars and trucks for the day. To make things worse, the inclines were horrible, steep and long. As for the weather, it was around 8 degrees Celsius and raining, with a nice chilling headwind. My nose was frozen, my hands were numb and my feet were not far off. By lunchtime, I had been chased by over 6 dogs, while their owners just sat there and watched. The last two, I am sorry to say, whimpered home

sore because I was sick of having my heels clipped at, so I decided to jump off my bike and help them understand what it feels like to be chased and attacked.

Moving right along, by 2pm, I knew that today was “that day”. Now what exactly is “that day”? “That day” is the day or the defining moment in any challenge, whether it be life, sport, work --- whatever, when you are given a choice, either fight or give up. In life, we have moments like these often. In previous challenges, I have found that you usually have one. Today, I believe, was that day, and as much as I wanted to avoid it, it was there in my face --- “go on Alex, quit, and be done with this.”

From that point onwards, I struggled. I doubled up on my clothes to keep warm, but this only proved to offer a temporary fix. The hills were killing my legs and my knee, and I still had so far to go. At 3:30pm, I spoke to the Mayor of Owensville, an absolutely fantastic guy --- Dixon Somerville, who advised me, when I arrived, we could catch up and he would put me up for the night (some encouraging news!).

By the time I hit Highway 28, I still had approximately 20 miles to go; this wouldn't be so bad except for the fact that I could only manage around 8 miles an hour and it would be dark in about an hour's time.

I couldn't stop thinking about giving in, at least for the night. I wanted to stop peddling but I did not want to stop moving my legs as I needed to keep warm. I stopped for a coffee at a small gas station and the customer service attendant told me how cold it was outside (funny, I didn't seem to notice). As I walked out with my coffee, another customer told me how cold and windy it was, and how soon it would be dark (funny x 2, I guess I don't look like I feel the cold!).

I sat on the footpath and got thinking. When I finished my coffee, I got back on my bike and started peddling slow --- real slow. 17 miles was going to take me well over 2 hours. As the road flattened out a bit, I stopped and stood in the gutter... my thought trail went something like this...

Quitting is so easy, and, if you're not totally honest with yourself, quitting becomes acceptable. As human beings, we each have a core foundation of who we are, but each time we quit, a little bit of that core --- that character gets chipped away. We lose the fight that gets us through life that helps us overcome adversity. Quitting then becomes a habit, and, each time you give in, it makes the next time just a little bit easier.

If I quit today, what happens when things get hard tomorrow? If I quit today, I am not just quitting a cycle, I am quitting in life, because all these instances are intertwined. What about the pain? --- what about it! Pain is in our lives every day, and more often than not, we create it, we then use this pain (or bad experience) to unknowingly build an identity of a victim in society; we think the world owes us something and that success should land on our doorstep.

Sound familiar? Of course it does, the first few lines of this blog were me, playing the victim, telling you how hard my life was right now, telling you the world and weather was against me. You see, when you are consciously aware of it, you can change it, and, as I sat back and listened to myself, I got angry --- no, I got determined.

I started peddling fast --- 28kms. an hour. In 4 miles, I ran in to Mayor Somerville; he had come looking for me. As I pulled over to talk to him (I recognized him from his photo on the internet), he told me that Owensville was 9 miles away. He then offered me a lift in his truck.

Here it was, the defining moment. I could give in right now, load my bike and take the easy way out. When I got to Owensville, I would feel good I made it, and slightly guilty, but that would pass I am sure. I looked at Mayor Somerville and I apologized. "Mayor Somerville, I appreciate your offer but right now, I have to do this on my own, I will see you in Owensville." He looked at me in an odd way, but then told me he would follow me in his car with his headlights on, what a guy!

That was it, for the next nine miles I was a madman, I was not willing to give in, not now --- not ever! I pushed, I struggled to breathe as I went up the slight inclines, my legs were burning, my lips were dry and I was freezing. I arrived in at Owensville exhausted; my average speed was 29kms. an hour.

When Mayor Somerville got out of the car, he congratulated me and introduced me to one of his officers. We then went to dinner (still in my biking gear) and spoke about life in general and making positive changes in other people's lives.

When I got back to my accommodation I went and had a hot shower. I regularly speak of each individual having their own mountains to climb; today, I faced one of my own and I overcame it. Today, I was proud to be Alex Petrou and I knew that next time I was faced with a difficult situation, I would overcome it, not choose to walk away. Today was my defining day of the [Street Dreams Project](#).

### **Day 24 – After every dark night, there's a bright day!**

I woke up from a knock at the door. When I opened it, Mayor Somerville was standing there. We had a chat for about 30 minutes and then I packed my gear and cycled down to Owensville City Hall, so we could get some photos.

After about an hour (I was fortunate enough to meet other members of Mayor Somerville's team), we went down to McDonald's to get some breakfast. Mayor Somerville is an interesting guy; during his career, he was a successful business man, and he ran for Mayor of Owensville because he became frustrated with the way in which the town was being managed. So at 74 years



of age, he stepped up and put his name forward in order to make the changes he believed the town needed to progress forward.

Mayor Somerville and I spoke at length about the environment our youth have been brought up in, and how more positive changes can be implemented in to society. One thing I do believe is that today's society lacks in consequences and, as a result, our youth are becoming complacent. I am also of the opinion that we are far too concerned with what will benefit us in the immediate future, instead of creating a balance and also implementing long term strategies that will benefit our future generations.

I listened intently as Mayor Somerville told me about his childhood. From the snow storms he had to walk through to get to school, to starting work as a 6-year-old on a farm and the times he remembered as a child where, in Mayor Somerville's words, "everybody knew everybody, and people bartered and worked for each other". I am always fascinated by the stories of older generations, and Mayor Somerville's were funny as well as interesting. Two lines that really stuck in my mind were the following, "Alex, one thing we never realized during my time as a child was how poor we were, because everyone else was just as poor, so we made do." The second was a line his father said to him, "Son, we all don't think the same, if we did, everyone would want my wife... Now, I am 5 feet tall, but she is 5 feet wide," the latter made me laugh for the rest of the day.

After we had finished breakfast, I met Mayor Somerville's wife --- a lovely lady, and then it was time for me to get moving. After I wished Mayor Somerville luck with his current campaign and he wished me well on the rest of my journey, I went outside to check my tyres and repack my panniers. As I stepped outside, I noticed a young couple looking at my bike so I said hello and they said hello back. We sparked a normal conversation and as I told these guys I was cycling for homeless youth, the young girl responded and said, "hey, that is us, thank you so much for doing what you're doing." I was a little shocked and while she was talking, I noticed she was shaking and cold, so I gave her a pair of gloves I had in my bag which I was going to throw out, but chose to keep as I had a feeling I would find someone who needed them. I then gave them the candy that the lovely girls at the Mayor's office gave me, so they had something to eat, I then got on my bike and started peddling.

The weather today was the exact opposite to the previous day; it was warm, sunny and besides my swollen knee, I felt good. I kicked off my cycle in a positive mood and was half-way to my destination. After a couple of hours, the continuing rollercoaster roads of Missouri just didn't bother me today. I cycled without the pressure of getting out of the cold and finding a place to stay, and at 5:30pm, I arrived in St. Louis where I met a good friend of mine --- Tyler Schaefering. St. Louis was also my final rest destination before a 16-day stretch to the finish line.

## Rest Period - 4

I woke up about mid-morning and attempted to walk downstairs to make some breakfast. In truth, I looked pathetic; my knee was so swollen and sore I did a “half hold on to the railing, half act tough kind of movement” fit for YouTube.

At the time, I wasn't too concerned, I mean, I have had bad injuries before and I expected this one to go away. Turns out I was fresh out of luck for the remainder of my stay in St. Louis and instead of only staying for two days, I was out of action for a week.

Now, being the jolly chap that some say I am (thanks mum!), I was keen to get out and explore the city and make use of my time. My exploring quickly turned in to a few drinks here and there and a nonstop Cardinals marathon (the Cardinals were playing the Texas Rangers in the Baseball World Series).

So for the most part, it was myself and Tyler trekking down to a funky restaurant and bar called Mike Shannons (<http://shannonsteak.com>) that a friend of ours manages, for a few drinks and some serious Cardinals supporting!

Diana (Tyler's angel of a mother) also organized for both Tyler and myself to head to a St. Louis Blues ice hockey game. Alex Steen, a Blues player and client of Diana's was nice enough to give us tickets to the game and also a locker pass, nooiccee!!

For the next few days, the Cardinals played away from home, so I spent most of my time hanging out with Tyler, Diana and John (Papa Schaeff). John is a true blue master chef --- no joke! The guy cooked some of the most amazing meals I have ever had in my life (wait, can I say that? Eek... sorry mum, you're still the best, but John is clipping at your heels) and Diana... oh my, your pumpkin pie!!!! Made me slightly weak at the knees.☺ The local night life in St. Louis was also a preferred option and I will stop right now to give a quick shout out to two gorgeous young ladies --- Shannon Vanmatre and Jen Milward!

By the time Thursday came around, it was Game 6 and the Cardinals were one game down; it was do or die. Tyler and I had decided the night before to hire a car for two or three days to get around. Now, here is where things get a little funny. By this stage, I had cycled around 2,000+ miles and managed to remain safe and in one piece. Tyler and I get in to our suave rental car and drive five minutes down the road and BANG! Yup, we get rear ended! I mean, can you even begin to imagine! All the folks who keep telling me to be safe on my bike, that what I am doing is dangerous and so many things could happen to me, and yet the thing I feared most --- being hit by a car, happens when I am in a car during a rest period, hahahaha, yeah life is funny. No, seriously, you can laugh if you like....

Anyway, news got better. Game 6 of the World Series, baseball was on and Tyler and I had been lucky to be given two tickets from Shannon. We attended the game with her parents --- Pat and

Gary. We were all having a good time even though the Cardinals looked as if they had just lost the World Series when, out of nowhere, David Freese (under some immense pressure) registers two solid hits, the second one winning Game 6 for the Cardinals. Pat, Gary, Tyler and I hugged and danced (as did the rest of the stadium!!!) Then, Tyler and I ran down to Mike Shannons to ahhhhhh, celebrate in style!

The next evening, it was Game 7 and again, we were decked out in Cardinals gear. Long story short, it seems the Cardinals spooked Texas the previous night and they snatched the World Series at home, in front of the largest sporting crowd I have ever seen in my life.

In between the socializing, I did manage to do work as well and by Monday (Halloween), I had completed a new route which saw me in Washington on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November. This would mean I would arrive 4 days later than I had anticipated, but due to the fact I started 4 days late I would still do what I had set out to do --- cycle across the USA in under 52 days.

I was also lucky enough to spend a fair amount of time with John, Diana and Tyler. The Schaefering family really looked after me during my time in St. Louis. They made me feel at home and welcome to the point that by the time I was cycling out of the city, I had a feeling of nostalgia. Being away from my family in Australia, and being in such good care in St. Louis also made me again realize how important it is to provide a home for our younger generations, somewhere they can feel welcome, safe and supported.

### **Day 25 – Have I even done this before?**

On Tuesday, it was time to cycle out. I was nervous as Tyler dropped me outside the St. Louis city limits. All I could think about was the daunting task of cycling over 1,200kms. in the next 10 days! Nevertheless, I would give it my best shot. I said goodbye to Tyler and that was it, back to business on my favourite black leather saddle.

For most of the day, I drifted, thinking about different things I wanted to do when I returned to Australia and critiquing previous ideas I had put on the back burner. The worst thing about thinking about these things while you are on a bike is that you don't have the time or the free hand to write down what you are thinking.

By 5pm. I was about an hour out of my location (Olney) and my legs were dead! I was quite annoyed at myself, "Ummm, hello Alex, have you even done this before?", "Yeah, shut up, I just had a week off with an injury you twat, give me a break." Shortly after, I sent my brain to the penalty box and decided to listen to some music. Great idea, except for the fact my iPod died on me after 20 minutes and I still had a while to go.

For the next hour +, I thought now was a better time than any to sing as loud as I could, cars honked when they went past, but I didn't care, I sang the same song over and over again (Eddie

Vedder, Hard Sun), which took my mind off the fact the sun had disappeared and I was now in the dark.

When I arrived in Olney, it was like a ghost town so I settled in to a Super8 for the night. My legs felt like they had been beaten with an oriental bamboo stick, which, I am sad to say, I liked because it made me feel like I worked hard.

After showering and spoiling myself with a wee glass of Coke (appreciate the little things!!), I checked my route for the following day, cursed a bit about the distance then drifted on in to la la land.

### **Day 26 – Windy much?**

I woke up in the morning, packed my bags and cycled down to Town Hall to meet with Mayor Mark Lambird. Mark was a great guy and we had a great chat about youth homelessness and life in general. Mark really has his finger on the pulse when it comes to the city's future and potential and I admired his passion.

Once Mayor Lambird and I had a picture taken together, it was game time. I cycled down Main Street and was on my way to Bedford already complaining to myself about the condition of the roads.

Well, it seems, the further I went, the worse the road became, and the worse the traffic was. I mean, how many people want to beep their horns at me --- seriously, share the road, fu#%!!! I was getting frustrated, the final straw came when a lady stopped behind me, when I turned around to see what her story was, she threw her hands up in the air like it was the end of the world!

Fortunately for her, she hit a red light up ahead and had the pleasure of me pulling up next to her. I politely asked her what her problem was, “blah, blah, fu#%, blaahh fu#% blahhhhh” (Oh yeah, this one graduated from Yale, real intelligent!) In my head, I had a scrubs moment, and I envisioned myself picking up my bike and throwing it at her car, then bouncing on her bonnet like a monkey --- and making monkey noises. Instead, I just repeated what she said to me, the way I felt it sounded, she looked all confused for a moment, which I forgave her for, then she sped off in to the distance --- a real hero and role model to all the other stressed out, impatient and rude individuals who exist on this lovely planet earth. Anyway, I took great pleasure in cycling past her and waving at every red light I passed her at (5 in total). It made me happy and for once, I was excited about being on a bike, it also gave me a new little competition --- “beat grumpy to the end of town”, me like.. me win!!

Anyway, in the early afternoon, I had a call from the Mayor's Office in Bedford. I answered and it was Debbi (the Mayor's Assistant and Office Manager). After talking to Debbi about the Street Dreams Project, Debbi said she would try to source accommodation for me then call me back.

Within half an hour Debbi called, she was onto it! Better yet, she said she had spoken to her husband and that I was welcome to stay on their couch. I thanked Debbi and told her I would call her once I got closer to Bedford.

Four hours later, I gave Debbi a call as I was just outside of Bedford. Debbi advised me the road was not good coming in and that I should stay where I was and she would have her husband (Kev) come and pick me up. Kev is a top bloke with a great sense of humour and the guy likes to talk, which I like. He is a pastor at his church and he and Debbi had also travelled to Australia, so we had plenty to yap about on the way and while we shopped for dinner.

When we arrived at Kev and Debbi's house, I met Deb in person. She is a sweetheart, such a kind and wonderful woman with a 24/7 smile on her face. I also met one of Kev and Deb's daughters, Elizabeth (Lizzy), a lovely young lady with a smile as big as both Kev's and Deb's, what a great family.

After we had dinner --- Deb cooked an awesome home-cooked meal which included steak, mashed potatoes, green beans and corn, yum! We all sat around on the couches and spoke about different things. Kev made me a wicked coffee which added to my full belly and put me in quite a jolly state, so much that I didn't go to bed until 1am.

## **Day 27 – Clouds are overrated.**

My alarm went off at 8am and that is pretty much all it did as I hid it under my pillow. Kev woke me up an hour later.

I looked outside and it was pouring rain. The previous night, I had planned a new route with Kev as he had done a lot of travel and suggested I scrap the way I was going and head NW through Pennsylvania then south in to Maryland. Being that I had already changed my route so many times, one more couldn't hurt, so I did as he suggested. The only concern here was that the highway out of town on my new route was deemed very dangerous and heavy with truck traffic, on top of the fact it was raining. Kev told me he would drop me out of town where it was safe and hopefully out of the rain.

Once I was ready, we popped in to see Deb at her office, still with a smile on her face. We hugged it out and then the three of us had our photo taken. Kev and I then went and grabbed a bite to eat before driving out of town.

I don't know why I was surprised at the state of the road on the way out of Bedford; Kev had warned me about it but I have a habit of shrugging things off. Today, I was glad I didn't. With the rain, it was so difficult to see ahead of us, particularly when trucks were driving and there was not a shoulder to ride on. Nevertheless, once we both realized the rain was not going to end, Kev dropped me off at a gas station and being the gentleman that he is, he grabbed me a coffee and waited for me while I packed my bike. Once I was ready to go, we said goodbye and I promised I would stay in touch. I then cycled off in to some warm, beautiful rain that made me so happy I wanted to vomit on my face! Note to self, don't chew gum while cycling in the rain, all you get is a mouth full of little stones and goose bumps as you think about where those stones were before you chewed on them.

Another handy little situation was getting a flat tyre without a place to pull over and change it, while it was pouring rain and with a bitter cold wind to back it up, yep I really had plenty of fun. This was only the second time I had ever contemplated taking my own life, the other time was when I was five years old and I went to my kindergarten dress-up day in a Superman costume my darling mum made me. The only problem was she made it the wrong colour and boy didn't all the other kids let me know about it (mum I really loved that suit, just saying!). Just to add quickly to that story, a week later, all the kids wanted the new and improved Superman costume, true story, and still to this day I still believe that Superman himself envies the way I looked in my light blue cape. ;)

By the time I changed my tyre, I was drenched and in quite a funny mood, so the non-existent shoulder on the road did not bother me. It may have bothered all the cars that drove by me tooting their horns (again), but I like to think that they were saying "hey, rider guy, love your bike and wow, that rain coat is fab, Gucci?"

When I cycled in to Cincinnati, I gave a friend of mine Sandra (Sandy) a call. Sandra and I actually met via Twitter and she became a real supporter of the Street Dreams Project, being a writer for Yahoo!, she was also kind enough to do an article for us and promote our project, Seed of Thought and youth homelessness in general. Thanks Sandy!!!!

When I spoke to Sandy, she said she was just North of Cincinnati and that she would leave soon. I was thinking 10-15 minutes max, but as I looked on my map, I realized she was in Dayton which was well off my course and over an hour away, yikes.

As my luck is often super good, on the very night Sandy had to pick me up with her best friend's husband (EJ), the traffic in to Cincinnati was horrible; long story short, I sat outside the Police Station for two hours freezing while I waited for them to arrive.

When the time finally came, it was great to meet Sandy in person and EJ; it was also nice to get in to a warm car! On the drive back to Dayton, we all conversed and upon arrival, I also met Sandy's best friend and EJ's wife, Christina (Chrissy). Chrissy made us some M&M cookies which were so tasty, and we all sat around and had a real good chat full of laughs and the odd

making fun of Alex's accent. I have said it before and I will say it again, nothing beats great company!

Once the excitement died down, I retired for the night. I knew I had a big day coming up tomorrow and surprise, surprise I had to reroute but only for a single day, thankfully.

### **Day 28 – Short and sweet.**

I semi woke up at around 8am (the beauty of sleeping in someone's basement and hearing the kids wake up for school) and I didn't feel so great. So I went upstairs and told Sandy and Chrissy that I was going back to sleep for a few hours.

At 10:30am, Chrissy came down and woke me up, luckily! The plan was that, due to the fact I was way off course after heading to Dayton, Sandy would drop me outside of Dayton on to the highway (to get out of the crazy traffic and the interstate route's) and I would then ride to my next check point. So, after a light conversation with the girls, Sandy and I decided to go and have brunch, which was great. She then dropped me at a gas station and off I went.

Riding in to the afternoon, I was pretty relaxed and the pain in my knee had died off slightly so it was far more comfortable. There was a cool breeze and really, I just coasted along at a steady pace until I reached Circleville for the evening. The local mayor's office was closed and it was getting dark much earlier now, so I checked in to a budget motel for the night, grabbed myself some Bob Evans for dinner (so good!) and then retired for an early night's sleep...

### **Day 29 – Energy ++**

Early night's sleep + a good meal = Alex feeling very good today. You guessed it, I bounced up out of bed this morning, packed my gear, blew the front office girl a goodbye kiss (should have got her name first!) and off I went. Peddling like a lunatic, (I had Bob Evans for breakfast... blueberry crepes... just saying) I clocked up some serious miles in good time.

The terrain was pretty tough today as I started getting back into the ups and downs, but it didn't seem to bother me. By about midday, I stopped in Lancaster to have some lunch but the funny thing is, I didn't feel like stopping, so I had a 10-minute break and then continued on, oh this was way too much fun, I thought.

The highway had not improved over the past few days and the shoulder was still extremely narrow, but I took special care to stay as close to the grass as I could, geez I am a nice bloke. I even stopped for cars and waved them pass at certain intersections. I could almost feel the butterflies flapping their little wings around me, whispering sweet nothings in my ear, damn today was good!

When I arrived in to Zanesville, I called the Mayor's Office --- I had been trying since 9am and I didn't get an answer, not once. The butterflies disappeared and I decided to ride to the City Hall and ask them what their story was. Ohhhh, about half way down, I felt quite silly; today was Saturday and there was no one in the office... come back little butterflies, I thought, as my cheeks went a slight shade of red.

With that said, I found myself some accommodation and spent the night blogging and listening to music. When I attempted to go to sleep around midnight, I just couldn't do it, so I went in to my bag and grabbed myself a few apricot and coconut bars and ate them... good work, fat boy (I heard my conscience say)... hmmm... I grinned to myself... because I can, you Nazi, no weight watching here! Anyway, food did the trick and I went to a place far, far away, where everyone rides bikes and there are no mountains or trucks, and helmets look cool!).

### **Day 30 – Mental preparation.**

Still in my energetic mood when I woke up, I went and had waffles for breakfast --- okay, I stuffed my face with waffles!!! My excuse was that I needed the energy.☺ It was a nice big day today as were the next four days following, I was about to ride in to the Appalachians, yipeeee. So the next two days would be a good build up --- long distances and some good inclines.

Anyway, I packed my gear, and got going. Turns out my legs weren't having it today and with the amount of hills that I wasn't really expecting, I was slowed down a bit.

The iPod was cranking as the cars zoomed past me and I rode at a pace that made it comfortable for me to think --- to think sensibly! I thought about negative situations that I had encountered in my life and the ways I had dealt with them. The consistency for me was that each time I addressed a problem immediately and played out all scenarios, things were resolved and less conflict was evident. When, however, I allowed things to go on, to fester and grow, was when real problems took place.

“Wait to go Al, while you are riding you may as well criticize yourself, that will really get you moving,” I thought, but in all seriousness, I have often found that self-criticism can be a great tool to being more consciously aware of things you need to improve on, as long as one knows when to stop. Unfortunately, I am also a minor fan of external criticism, why? Because when someone is blunt with you, particularly someone you respect, it can give you the jolt you need to see things that you weren't aware of previously. I once read a quote of Winston Churchill's that I read from time to time:

“Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfils the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.”



Back to the road, I was powering up and down the hills and this was also the first time I had been on a major interstate due to the fact the highway I was on, joined the interstate and it was the only way to go. Here is where my luck, well, failed miserably! No more energy, but plenty of laughter... at myself.

I was at the top of a long steady climb, trucks flying past, cars beeping and yelling, so much shrapnel on the road, it was ridiculous, when BANG! Flat tyre, ok no worries, I thought, good times... I will just change it and be on my merry way. So away I go, all sorted (I am a black belt tyre changer now) and off I went, within a minute BANG! Flat tyre number two. I get off my bike, pull out my tube and it has 3 punctures, well Alex only has two patches left --- case closed, no more tubes.

So I get a little frustrated, big deal, I kick a tree... yeah, I kicked a tree, had my big boy pants on while I did it to! I become obsessed with why I got two consecutive flats in 3 minutes. So I pull my back tyre off and whalla, the problem was so obvious. Parts of my back tyre were so worn that there were holes going through to the tube. Apparently, I was not checking my tyres every day because, because I just didn't (ha! Bet I got you with that one!).

Now being in a position which didn't exactly scream enthusiasm, I started walking. I managed about 3 miles before a car stopped up ahead. A young man got out and asked me what was wrong and what my project was. I told him what had happened and referred him to the Street Dreams website. It turns out he had done some cycling himself and offered to drive me in to town. I was frustrated, I didn't have long to go and I had cycled 55 miles in a good time. But, without any tubes and with my bike needing a whole new tyre I accepted his offer and packed my bike in his car.

Funnily enough, we only introduced ourselves as I was about to get in. The young chap's name was Jonathon and his wife's name was Molly.

Although our car conversation was short, I learnt that Jonathon was in PR and Marketing and that Molly was studying a degree in Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage. I was quite interested in this so we had a brief chat about it before I went on my merry way chatting about life in general.

The drive ended way too quickly and Jonathon and Molly dropped me in town near a Super8. We exchanged numbers and they also told me how to get to the local bike shop in the morning, as it was now clear I was going nowhere tomorrow without new tyres.

I checked in to my room, and got nice and comfortable. I looked at my route and tomorrow was a long day with some solid climbs, guess I had better get my mind ready!

## **Day 31 – This ride is like a rollercoaster, baby!**

I woke up this morning sore and tired. I guess the past few days had taken their toll on my legs, the tiredness came from old mate above my room who put his concrete boots on for the night and walked around in the early hours of the morning.

I decided to have a cold shower to wake up --- dumb move really. I then went and had some breakfast and waited for the local bike store to open at 10am. This did, however, pose a small problem in the fact that today, I had a 70+ mile cycle, which apparently was all rolling hills. I really needed to get an early start but with no back tyre, I would have to settle for a late one.

At 9:58am, I was waiting out front of the bike store and I had my tyre done and changed by 10:20am. I then hurried back to my accommodation to assemble my bike and get going. I was out and on the road by 11am, and from that point I knew it was going to be a battle, particularly as it was now getting dark at 5:30pm so I had less daylight.

It didn't take long before I ran in to what would be a consistent pattern of terrain --- rolling hills. What is difficult about this is you can never quite pick up a good rhythm and it is tough to measure your distance based on speed, basically, you just have to guess how far you have gone and rely on street signs. I was not enthusiastic about this at all, and as I began cycling, all I could think about was the song Love Rollercoaster by the Chilli Peppers, how fitting, I thought, but also, how annoying!

For the duration of the day, all I did was battle, I battled the hills, I battled the trucks and cars (so many impatient twats in WV), I battled the fatigue and I battled time. When I stopped for a quick lunch break, I decided to try to find a place to stay in Uniontown, PA.

I called the Mayor's Office and the lady who answered hung up on me. I called the Police Department and they could not help and then I called the Fire Department, which was also unable to assist. Out of sheer frustration, I just started peddling again and thought I would deal with it when I arrived.

Now, surprisingly enough --- don't ask me how I made it in to Uniontown in 7 hours. At first, I sat around a few gas stations, then I attempted to call a safe house --- no answer. Finally, as I no longer have my camping gear with me, I checked in to a budget hotel. What a long and frustrating day, I was beat. I went and got a pasta dish for dinner, then came back to my room only to find there was no hot water --- awesome! So another cold shower and a light stretch and I was ready for bed.

## **Day 32 – Sometimes, it is better not knowing!**

I woke up in Uniontown bright and early and ready to go. While I ate breakfast, I looked over the route I planned the night before and it was clear it was not going to be an easy day. The terrain looked rough and the distance was over 80 miles.

I cycled down town to a local gas station and went in to do my usual routine --- coffee and some beef jerky for the road. The store attendant asked me where I was going, “East or West” he said. “East,” I replied. He then just looked at me and paused for a moment, and then he said “Ohhh, you’re going up the mountain.” Well, any thoughts I had about a difficult day were magnified by this comment, and I kind of wondered why he had to point out the difficult task I had ahead of me. It was kind of like this...

Alex’s mouth, “Yeah sure, guess I am heading up the mountain, how high is it exactly?”

Alex’s brain, “Thanks you wan\*er, now I know there is a huge f\*ck off mountain that I have to climb, and I will probably just keep thinking about it!”

Anyway, I downed my coffee and decided I better get going considering I had a massive mountain to climb. After a short period, it appears that my home dawg from the gas station was indeed correct, this was one tough climb. After an hour, I got to the top and had the opportunity to peer in to the horizon, and what do I see? A hell of a lot more mountains!!! My little heart sunk and I decided I would get some Subway at a small town and feel sorry for myself for a short while.

Once I finished my sub, I was off again. I met a girl online named Rachel and she had offered me her couch for the night in Cumberland, so accommodation was sorted. So it was just the mountains that stood in my way of a good night’s rest.

As I spent the next 4 hours climbing, up and down and up and down, I was becoming increasingly angry and frustrated. I was struggling big time; all I could think about was if this was tough, the Appalachians were going to be hell.

By 2pm, I had climbed over 5 mountains, each reaching around 3,000 feet and I knew that I couldn’t have travelled all that far. You see by 2pm, usually I had around 80kms. covered, timed out I would make it in to most towns by around 5pm. Today, I was not so lucky.

At 3:30pm, I had reached another summit and I was exhausted. I located a small information board in the small town I was passing through, which gave me a detailed map of old Route 40 --- the route I would take all the way to Hagerstown, MD.

While I looked over the map, my earlier worries were confirmed. I had only covered 40 miles over 6 hours and I still had another 30 miles to go, and another 3 mountains to climb! On top of

that, I only had 2 hours before it was dark --- “going to be a long afternoon, Al” I thought, and then I got going.

For the next 2 hours, I battled what felt like a dozen mountains and as I watched the sun go down, I arrived at a junction I was certain was only 5 miles from Cumberland. Well, that was until I spotted a sign that said Cumberland was another 16 miles! 16 MILES, ARE YOU KIDDING! I yelled out to, oh, to no one! That means I had only done 14 miles on 2 hours. “Horrible effort Al, what, are you getting slower, do your legs hurt, what was that? Nothing? Yeah, that is what I thought --- get moving.” You probably have guessed by now I was pretty annoyed at my pace and everything else. I got moving only to realize I hadn’t climbed the final mountain of the day, when I got to the top of yet another 3,000 foot incline I made out the spec of light that signalled my next location.

I arrived in Cumberland at 6:30pm and called Rachel. Rachel met me down at the local McDonald’s and then took me back to her house where I met her husband, father and her mother.

Rachel’s father was a real classic and as I spoke to him about my journey, he gave me advice on my next route, told me about the history of America and asked me what I needed for the following day. I then asked him how bad the Appalachians were going to get. “The Appalachians,” he said “well son, you just crossed over the worst of them”... Well fancy that, I thought with a cheeky smirk on my face, I didn’t even know I was tackling this feared mountain range! Ha-ha, I guess sometimes it is better not knowing what you’re heading for!

With that thought in mind, I went to my room and attempted to go to sleep, slightly excited at the fact that tomorrow might be a little easier.

### **Day 33 – The end is near.**

With two days to go, I was on a serious high. I said goodbye to Rachel and her wonderful family and set off to conquer the last day of the Appalachians (or at least I thought it was).

I powered pretty hard for the first few hours up and down... up and down... up and down... up and down... SERIOUSLY, I thought I was through the worst of it... lesson learnt again, Al, I thought --- don’t listen to other people’s perceptions, these mountains were far more difficult than the previous day and by 3pm, I was hurting.

After a 3:30pm stop at McDonald’s and a quiet moment in which I faced the next set of mountains and gave them the middle finger, I was back on my now soft leather seat and roared off in to the horizon, no really --- I literally roared because I thought it would make me laugh, and it did.

At 6pm, I cycled in to Hagerstown sore and cold; it had started raining and I was beat. I checked in to a motel after unsuccessful calls to the Police Department and the Fire Department and then

just sat on my bed for a moment. Tomorrow was it, I thought, tomorrow you finish what you set out to do 52 days ago. What a strange feeling that overcame me, one I did not expect until after I had finished. As I changed and walked to get my 2<sup>nd</sup> last meal time went so slow, now and all of a sudden I wanted to stop and observe everything around me --- ridiculous really. So I snapped myself out of this mood and went and downed a quarter pounder meal, then wandered back to my room and fell asleep.

### **Day 34 – You did it.**

I didn't sleep much during the night and I didn't move much the next morning; in fact, I stayed in bed until 11am which was not a good move. I don't know what kept me there, maybe it was the fact I was nearly done, maybe it was the fact I wasn't sure if I was ready to be done and part of me also was trying to make sense of what the past 52 days meant. I knew I never wanted to be homeless and so uncertain again, and I learnt that the life of a homeless person is more than uncomfortable --- it is absolutely degrading, depressing and horrible. All this reflection made me hungry so I walked back over to McDonald's again to indulge...

45 minutes later, I was on the road and the conditions were disgusting and dangerous. I had one major mountain to climb today, the shoulder was thin and it was freezing. So I had another period of thought and sat at a gas station sipping a coffee and eyeing off my challenge for the day.

At 2pm, I was finally ready to go and so was the afternoon wind, cutting through the youthful lines in my face.☺ I did a solid 4 hours on the bike before I took a rest. As bad as it was, I was in such deep thought I didn't really notice much of what was going on --- including the weather. By 6:30pm, I was freezing though and I couldn't feel my left foot... I knew I had about 30-40kms. left before I met Eddie from Stand Up For Kids in Washington... so, I knuckled down and finally after 52 days, I was in Washington, D.C.

The cycle in was funny, well to me it was. I stopped in the middle of a highway and helped a guy push his car off the road, I got lost twice and didn't arrive at Eddie's place until around 9:30pm. The first thing I did was have a hot shower and for a moment, I was concerned about my foot which was now purple and after 20 minutes, still without feeling.

When I got out of the shower, Eddie and I had a great chat, he is just an absolutely amazing guy and extremely easy to talk to. We discussed a bit of everything really. By around midnight, I was beat. I had a university to speak at the following morning so I shut my eyes and peacefully drifted off to the sweet rhythm of success.

### **Reflections**

Almost 5 months after the Street Dreams Project has finished, I have finally sat down to write a brief reflection. I guess it took me a while to recover and to really understand things on a level I could explain.

The project itself was about experiencing the life of a homeless young person. In Australia and the USA combined, there are over 1.5 million young people living on the streets. To me, this figure was outrageous, after finishing the Street Dreams Cycle and living on the streets in foreign surroundings, I still cannot find the words to explain how passionate I am about getting kids off the streets and allowing them to have a life they deserve; allowing them to experience the world with a roof over their head and surrounded by some form of support.

For me, personally, this challenge did push me to breaking point and once again, I found myself questioning my inner self, my life's journey and my desire to see others around me succeed, while also elevating my own personal growth.

Over 52 days, I travelled through harsh terrain and silly weather conditions and came out on top. It would not have been possible without all the assistance and care offered to me by each and every individual I crossed paths with. It is a wonderful feeling to know that no matter where you are in the world and no matter who you are --- there is always somewhere out there who will reach out to you and lend a hand.