

Portland to Patagonia by Bike and Handcycle

Raising Awareness for Disability Rights and the Importance of Active Lifestyles

By Dana McMahan



Something about Kelly Schwan tells you she'd be up for just about anything. It doesn't take a fortune-teller to see that a life full of adventure lies ahead for this 32-year-old occupational therapist. She's just as likely to pick up and move cross-country on her own as she is to jet to Beijing and volunteer at the Paralympics. As of this writing, she's pedaling through Tijuana with her partner, Seth McBride, a 30-year-old gold-medaling Paralympian. Quadriplegic since 17, Seth is traveling with her on a handcycle.

The pair left Portland, Oregon, last September for a 10,000-mile expedition to Patagonia. This will be the first time an athlete with a disability will have made a trip like this without a support crew, and the first time *anyone* will have taken on some of these roads on a handcycle. Seth tows his wheelchair, and Kelly's got on her bike everything else they need for the trip—more than a hundred pounds' worth.

Their extraordinary journey landed them on *National Geographic Traveler* magazine's 2013 Travelers of the Year list, but lifelong athlete Kelly doesn't seem to see anything extraordinary in what she does. "I don't remember a time when I didn't play sports," she told me over the phone just before they crossed into Mexico in November. "It's taught me so much about discipline and the importance of movement and being physical."

In the shadow

With a readily apparent physical disability, Seth becomes the center of attention. While people admire his strength in pedaling with his hands for 10,000 miles—Kelly calls him a beast—many seem to overlook that she's carrying the bulk of the weight, itself no easy task. She's also known to piggyback Seth when they encounter an obstacle not passable by wheelchair. Its got to be hard

to be the half of the couple in the shadows, but Kelly takes it in stride.

"He deals with it better. I couldn't handle all the attention," she says. "He's gotten used to it. My efforts are totally overlooked, but they're not overlooked by him. He knows how hard I'm working every day to carry our gear. He doesn't look past that effort."

She maintains an easy sense of humor about overcoming obstacles, always amused by the reactions they get. "You should have seen peoples' faces when I was carrying Seth on my back up the stairs at the Great Wall of China!" she says. "Their eyes were humongous! Meanwhile I'm just trudging up the stairs because we have to get there. We decided that these stairs are not going to stop us."

Then there was the time they were sneaking onto a train in Belgium. (Sneaking? Yep—they only had one stop to go and didn't have a ticket.) The platform, like many outside the United States, was not wheelchair accessible. When the train arrived, "I had Seth jump on my back. I was holding him with one arm and scooped up the chair with the other," she explains. "Here I come charging up to this train with the guy and the wheelchair, and people parted the seas. That was perfect. But their eyes were so wide!"

A two way street

How does Kelly view this reversal of typical—physical, anyway—gender roles?

“I’ve always, whether I’ve known it or not, had a feminist viewpoint,” she says, “I always wanted to play with the boys because, where I grew up, they were better athletes. I didn’t see the gender lines. It’s weird because I don’t even think about it. It’s society’s reaction that makes me think about it. I don’t see it as an issue.”

She goes on, “Although Seth can’t and will never piggyback me, he will return that favor. This is a very two-way relationship. Despite what you see on the surface, we’re really helping each other out.”

While she’s bearing a significant portion of the physical side of the trip, Kelly relies on Seth for emotional support. “Most people don’t realize the emotional and psychological toll of a trip like this,” she says. “It can be difficult to be away from our family and friends. Seth is our rock. Even on a day-to-day level, navigating—if I don’t see it, he sees. What he doesn’t do, I do; what I don’t do, he does. It’s watching each other’s back.”

Changing perceptions

Kelly wants people to see what they accomplish together. Part of their reason for this trip is to show what’s possible when you try.

“There’s this perception that people with disabilities are unable to do anything,” she says. Mile by mile, she wants the trip to change that perception. “Whereas Seth is like, ‘It’s ok; we’ll get by,’ ... I’m a little louder with the disability rights stuff and making sure people are educated and aware of why it’s important to have an accessible business. You’re not just welcoming one customer but a whole community. I don’t walk around with a banner ... but, if the opportunity presents itself, I take it to educate. This entire trip is an opportunity to educate people, and I love it. I know that some people hear and see what we’re doing.”

Traveling on bikes allows the pair the chance to have conversations at every stop. “Every day, people ask [about the handcycle],” Kelly says. “One lady asked if we took turns and switched bikes. We smiled and said, ‘Actually, Seth can’t use his legs.’ Then the whole perception changes. You can see it in their faces: ‘Wow, and he can still ride a bike!’ So, these people, you can educate.”

Getting to the good part

Kelly’s not just looking to teach others, though. “I am constantly trying to learn the art of patience,” she says. “With travel, there is typically inherent hurriedness. Seth is so laid back and so patient, and I have never been a very patient person. We’ve talked about it daily—let it go if something is not perfect; there’s time; it will work

itself out—so I don’t get so sucked into the fine details that I miss the beauty of what we’re seeing every day.”

And there’s a lot left to see. “The majority of our trip is still to come,” Kelly says. “I don’t know what we’re going to accomplish. Are we going to make it the whole way? Will that matter? I don’t know.”

“Someone asked us, ‘At what point will you say you’re done?’” Kelly says. “Seth and I looked at each other and said, ‘Unless our bikes are stolen or we’re injured, there is no point at which we will say that until we’re at the finish line.’ We can expand on our goals. Traveling internationally will only raise awareness. We want to push ourselves as far as we can.”

How will they know if the trip is a success? “We kind of had this conversation,” Kelly says, “because there are *so* many goals of this trip: meet with other adaptive sports programs, teach them, teach us, and raise awareness for the importance of movement and physicality no matter your situation. And, [our final goal is] that Seth is the first person with quadriplegia to go on a handcycle, unsupported on this route. Honestly, if our trip ended today, we would have already accomplished those things. But we’re still getting to the good part.”

“My friend who travels a lot is like a female version of Seth, and she said to trust the journey. I trust our journey. It’s going to be good.”



Follow Kelly and Seth’s journey at longroadsouth.com and send encouragement to longroadsouth2013@gmail.com.

