

## **Biking Across America**

HARRISONBURG, Va. – Early on a chilly July morning, JMU student, Dan Oates, and 28 other cyclists started out on the 100 mile trip from Gunnison, Colorado to Ouray. After riding the Million Dollar Highway, stopping for lunch and climbing over Red Mountain, the altitude began to slow a few riders. Catching a second wind, the group made it over yet another pass then embarked on the stunning descent through the Rockies and into the valley of Ouray, the wind always in their faces.

“When you get up in the mountains, it’s very liberating and it’s just the most gratifying thing in the world to be able to climb a mountain, especially on a bike,” Oates said.

“He described Ouray as “this awesome, awesome tourist town at the base of the mountains. Literally you are surrounded by mountains, in an old mining community with hot springs.”

This 100-mile trip, known as a century, included biking up 14,000 feet – nearly the height of Colorado’s highest mountains and comparable to a length of almost 39 football fields. The ride was part of the Bike & Build program, which Oates, 20, has participated in twice. Last summer he was one of the four leaders of the 3,503 mile, 64-day trip from Manteo, North Carolina to San Diego, California. Through fund-raising cycling trips, Bike & Build raises money for affordable housing.

“Since inception, Bike & Build has donated over \$1.6 million, and this past season donated over \$496, 000,” said Kristian Sekse, Bike & Build Program Director. In addition to donating money, the organization also works to generate publicity about the need for affordable housing, and the bikers also work at various construction sites.

The climb into Ouray was day 48 of 65. Slightly more than halfway across the United States, the cyclists rode the century, considered an “epic day” by Oates.

Oates has biked and raced since he was in high school, and he was the youngest person to have ever undertaken the trip, turning 18 a few weeks into his first ride with Bike and Build. Still, for him the trip was more about relationships than biking.

“I really focused on what we were doing and the people I was surrounded with,” Oates said. “The group is pretty much all you have on the open road.”

Oates was fortunate to have the opportunity to be a leader on the trip even though he was one of the younger participants. He rode with adults who had more life experience and worked in many professions, among them education and medicine. But they all shared the same drive and motivation. A few days before the end of the trip, the group rode through the Santa Ana Mountains in Southern California along a stretch called Engineers Road.

“I’ve been riding for a long time and it was definitely the twistiest road I’ve ever been on,” Oates said. “You couldn’t see more than 100 feet down the road and it was like that for about five miles.”

Another day, said Oates, the group rode 120 miles through, “the fiercest headwinds I’ve ever encountered on a bike.”

But his favorite moments were simple ones.

“When you are in a car you are going so fast you don’t notice stuff that’s on the side of the road, but on the bike you have time to take it in and really absorb what’s going on,” says Oates. “If it’s cold outside, you’re cold. If it’s raining, you’re wet. If it’s hot, you can’t turn on the AC. You really experience the country as you go through it.”