

I travel, I see, and I become. That's my mantra for life. Growing up in Afghanistan and Pakistan meant being raised without much of the facilities and opportunities, especially as it relates to adventure and personal growth, readily available in the majority of Western countries. Growing up, I was told education was my only chance of survival in the politically and economically harsh environment that is Afghanistan. I took those advices, mostly given by my parents, seriously. A good education brought me to the U.S. on a full scholarship. One thing led to the other, and through hard work and the generosity of many people and institutions, I was able to get a U.S. higher education. I graduated from Middlebury College in February of this year.

Before I came to the U.S., I was destined to become a politician. With a U.S. education, I imagined working in such places as the UN. But then at the end of high school, something happened that changed the course of my life, and redefined my values for the better. I discovered mountain biking, and it allowed me to play like a child once again. It let me forget the war for a second, and enjoy life as it was, from behind a bicycle bar. It made me think about the vast and spectacular mountains back home, and how they are forgotten as places that can offer enjoyment, fulfillment and healing. It was at that moment, five years ago, that I embarked on a mission to bring those mountains to the forefront of life again; for the Afghans themselves as places they can appreciate and be proud to call home, and for foreigners to see Afghanistan in a positive light they have never seen before. Not to mention every time I ride, I have a blast.

I am a member of two organizations. The first is my own non-profit, Mountain Bike Afghanistan, established to grow the sport of mountain biking in my home country by getting more Afghan youth on bikes, and developing the necessary infrastructure for the sport to grow. My dream with Mountain Bike Afghanistan is that before long, young Afghan athletes will take the front line in the world's biggest cycling events and race against the world's best. In doing so, they will: 1) change the narrative of our country from war-torn to one whose youth has a lot of potential and promise, and 2) inspire a generation of young Afghans to take up cycling or any other adventure sport, get outside, have fun and build community. To achieve that goal, I am working hard myself to become the first pro Afghan mountain biker, and race the Olympics for my country. I am very fortunate to have discovered cycling in the U.S., and have this incredibly opportunity to train without worrying about security, and in a country with a strong cycling traditions that helps me grow. I realize this opportunity comes with a huge responsibility to share my knowledge and learnings with other Afghans back home who are not as lucky as I am. I strive to be the best cyclist I can be so I can help others in the best of ways I can.

The second organization I am a part of is Homestretch Foundation, a Tucson-based cycling residency and non-profit that is trying to remove gender equality in the sport of cycling through advocating higher pay for women and providing free housing for them to train. I am fortunate that this year they have opened up a couple beds for male athletes. My roommate, Sean Gardner, is an accomplished road rider for Gateway Trek. Every day, I am surrounded by incredible athletes from whom I learn a lot, both on and off the bike. These are not the typical results-driven athletes. These people care about so much more inside and outside of the sport. They are spearheading the movement to make the cycling industry fair and equitable to all people. It's a big honor to be a part of this organization.

One of my favorite adventures just happened. After graduating from Middlebury College this February, I packed everything in my old Subaru to drive across the country to get myself to Homestretch Foundation. My idea was to explore new places for mountain biking in the states I have never been, and connect with strangers and communities around our shared love of cycling while being a cultural ambassador for my country. Although I couldn't stick to my original plan of visiting North Carolina, Tennessee and Arkansas because they were getting a heavy storm, I was still able to see a lot of new places, meet new people, and connect with old friends. I stayed north of the storm, going through Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico. I stayed in Santa Fe for a week, and got to know the riding really well, which made me fall in love with Santa Fe as a possible place to live in. I was able to connect with the local community and tell them about Mountain Bike Afghanistan. I went on my longest climb to date, starting in the city at 7,000 ft and going up to 10,200 ft (from spring weather to winter in an hour). In Albuquerque (New Mexico), I connected with more cyclists, and went riding with them in the foothills of Sandia Mountains where the riding is so different from Vermont: it's much faster here, with plenty of cactus to look out for. When I arrived in Tucson, I had seen most of the U.S. before my eyes: people, landscapes, towns, cities--everything that makes this country what it is: a land of opportunity. It was a powerful experience, especially after leaving Vermont, my home of the past 4.5 years, and all of my friends behind. The trip, from all the time spent alone in the car, to exploring new biking places, meeting strangers, and crushing on their couches was a right of passage of sorts. It was uniquely transformative.

The person who's been my guiding light in all of these adventures is Ted King. He is a retired professional cyclist. From the day I initially sent him an email to saying goodbyes in Vermont, he's been there to help me become a better cyclist and person every day. From mentoring me in training, to helping me see how to be a genuinely caring person especially when one can afford to be one, and to doing everything right. Most of the times, he doesn't actually tell me what to do or how to do things; he just lets me see how it's done, and that makes for a healthy mentor/mentee relationship that's there but not forced. I strive to be a mentor like that to others who reach out to me for help.

When I watched Ryan's video, I was deeply moved by how he lived life so simply. It's easy to make life complicated and overthink important life decisions, but for him, it was as simple as just having fun and seeking adventure all the time. His deep attachment to what he liked, skiing, is not just a lesson for outdoor adventurers. It can even be applied to people in professional work environments. You like research, then be the best researcher; you like writing, then be the best writer. But from Ryan's core values, the ones that really struck me was "be the best son, brother, uncle" and "be the best friend." Because of limited travel opportunities due to visa, I haven't seen my parents and a great chunk of my family for almost 4 years. Distance in space and time can isolate you from your loved ones. And it doesn't help that cycling is at times an individualistic and, honestly speaking, a selfish sport. You want most of the things: results, bikes, trophies, and a name for yourself. I have struggled with this in the past couple years, especially with my parents who have a hard time seeing the value in the work that I am doing, but nevertheless support me out of parental love. This has made me distanced from them, at

least in my head. Ryan's core values was a reminder that I don't have to isolate myself from my loved ones. True, they may not understand my work and values, but that doesn't mean that they don't appreciate what I do. And outside of that, there are still plenty of things to share and care about. I wrote the same value in my core values list: "be the best son, brother, and uncle."

I am very excited for what's to come this year. I am feeling great in training, and I am looking forward to all of my mountain bike races. The highlights of my adventures include: a lot of bike races in my Mountain Bike Afghanistan jersey to raise awareness about my organization, connecting with cycling and non-cycling communities in Tucson, and other places I end up this year to carry the message of MTB Afghanistan and the movement we are building, and exploring new places with new people on and off my bike. The funds from Flyin Ryan Foundation will go towards covering my race expenses: race fees, travel, and bike maintenance.

I have some savings from my work-study student job which I am using to cover food, and other miscellaneous expenses. When it comes to living, another of Ryan's Core Values that resonated with me was living simply, especially with spending. I make a conscious effort to spend as little as possible, and only on things that I need to carry out my adventures.

I work with a USA Cycling coach, Dave McIntosh, who helped get the Rwandan Cycling team off the ground. He is kind to coach me for free. We have a great working relationship, and every day I feel better and stronger. So I can't wait to see what this year has in store for me. Another opportunity to try to upgrade to the professional category. Every day is a battle, an opportunity to make my dream of racing the Olympics happen. Fingers crossed. I am psyched.