

Edmonton Journal

June 30, 2014

Widower hitting the road in support of biking trail

Drunk driver killed professor's wife during cycling vacation

Chris Zdeb, Edmonton Journal

Edmund Aunger is about to embark on a cycling trip to Winnipeg in honour of his beloved late wife and soulmate.

Much of the nine-week, 2,750-kilometre trip will require him to bicycle on paved highways with speeding cars, something Elizabeth Sovis thought was too dangerous.

"She would tell me not to do it because she felt very strongly that bicycles should not ride on roads," he says.



Edmund Aunger will cycle to Winnipeg in honour of his late wife to support completion of the Trans Canada Trail.
Larry Wong, Edmonton Journal

For 10 years, the couple, who had known each other since they were 12, took a three-week cycling vacation alternating between somewhere in Canada and Europe.

Elizabeth, 63, who didn't learn to ride until she was 50, didn't like cycling in traffic so they ventured off trails only when they had no choice. That was the case July 14, 2012.

They had left the Cavendish Trail in P.E.I. to pedal four kilometres along a two-lane highway when Elizabeth was struck from behind, thrown 50 metres, and killed by a drunk driver.

Two days later Aunger returned to Edmonton with Elizabeth's ashes. Eight days after that, he quit his job at the University of Alberta's Faculte Saint-Jean where he had taught political science for 37 years and took up his late wife's cause of making the Trans Canada Trail, a national network of greenway trails to be accessible and safe for everyone.

The trip to Winnipeg is the second leg of a cross-country trip he plans to complete in stages by July 14, 2017, the fifth anniversary of Elizabeth's death, at the spot on the road in P.E.I. where she was killed. Last year, the 65-year-old cycled from Victoria to Edmonton. As he packs for the trip which starts Canada Day morning from the Trans Canada Trail Pavilion in Louise McKinney Park, Aunger talks of his frustration that Alberta, where the idea for a Trans Canada Trail was born in 1985, likely won't complete its promised leg of the trail by July 1, 2017, in time for Canada's 150th anniversary celebrations.

He's overcome with emotion whenever he speaks of Elizabeth and what she wanted for the bike trail.

The province has technically completed 45 per cent of the trail, but much of it is in no shape to be travelled on safely by bike, he says. The problem is that the province has no overall plan for the trail, having put the onus on municipalities to complete their segments piecemeal. Many of the rural municipalities that don't support it have done little or nothing, refusing to even zone land for use as a trail because of local opposition, he adds.

"You can't just say to people go out and build the trail and then try to draw little lines between whatever people are doing. You miss opportunities. You have to have some strategic plan, make legislative provisions, and put up the financial resources."

For example, the province lost the opportunity to use a railbed from Calgary and Edmonton.

"That 330 kms in 2000 would have cost \$7.4 million, certainly more today. Why in the richest province in Canada, the 'get er' done' province, can't we find the resources? This trail could have a huge impact on the quality of life for the people of this province."

As he did with the B.C. government last year, Aunger is petitioning the Alberta government to adopt a plan to finish the trail. He admits he can't do it alone, and without public support, he isn't very optimistic.

"I'm just trying to do my best," he says. "Obviously I'm not going to have any impact if I don't do anything. I have to do this. I have to try. This is what my wife wanted so it's her cause."

Readers can sign Aunger's online petition and follow his Ride the Trail for Elizabeth campaign at ridethetrail.ca. czdeb@edmontonjournal.com