TRIP OF A LIFETIME  By Debbie Vogt

In the summer of 2015, my 14-yr-old brother Josh and my dad bicycled the Great Allegheny Passage, beginning at our home in Rootstown, Ohio, bicycling to the official start of the trail in Pittsburgh, and ending in Washington, DC. Only one year younger than Josh, I was intrigued by our adventure and decided I would also like to do this trip.

As we discussed possibilities, Josh overheard us and asked he could join us on this trip, and we agreed. We began to make formal plans for the trip. First, we decided that I would use my mom’s bicycle. Dad got new tubes and tires placed. Josh and Dad hoped that their bicycles from last year were still in good shape and just use them as they were.

We planned to drive to Pittsburgh on Sunday, July 17 and then ride 35 miles to West Newton, PA. That first day, Josh and Dad would carry bags on our bikes and carry all of the gear. At the time I only weighed 75 pounds and Dad did not feel it would be advisable for me to try and carry any extra weight on my bicycle. Also, Josh and Dad had planned to always ride next to or near me, riding at my pace so that I would not feel pushed.

On Sunday, July 17, 2016, we left our house in Rootstown around 9:30 and drove to Pittsburgh. However,
once in Pittsburgh, where it was unfamiliar, we could not locate the GAP. Finally we got to a point where we were hopefully near the GAP. So we got our bikes packed up, said our goodbyes to Mom, and prepared to start riding. We were not in good moods since we had only planned to ride 35 miles today, only to realize that our distance would be more like 50 to 60-some miles, and we would not get to West Newton until very late. However, shortly afterwards we came to an area that Dad recognized from last year. We were on the GAP after only maybe four or five miles from the parking lot where we had started. This made our day and our moods went from discouraged to elated in one brief moment.

Finally, we got out on the trail where I imagined it and I felt much more relaxed and comfortable. We stopped three times this afternoon for snacks and a little rest. On the first rest stop we ate some snacks. The second rest stop was a restroom on the trail where we stopped for some cooler water at a pump. It was in the 90s and our water bottles were warm and nasty. Then we saw some pretty waterfalls and stopped to take photos of them. Our third snack stop was at one of the largest waterfalls that we had seen.

We arrived in West Newton around 4 p.m. Dad had rented two rooms at a bed and breakfast, which was right off the trail. The one room had a bunk bed in it and I stayed on the top while Josh was on the bottom. Dad was in the next room which had a queen bed. Both rooms were tiny but nice.
The next thing we did, since we were starving, was to walk about a quarter mile down the trail to a restaurant. I got spaghetti with sauce. It was very good and also a large portion, but a little too spicy for me. Josh got a hamburger and fries while Dad got a salad and cod. Then we went back to the rooms for a shower and called Mom and Jenna. I really missed Mom and the dogs already. Then we went out for an ice cream. I did miss home but I was very excited to continue on to DC and be able to say that I did this trip.

Monday July 18—Day Two

I had a difficult time sleeping and kept waking up. We eventually got up around 7 so that we could pack up our bicycles before breakfast. We were all ready by about 8:10. They gave us a large breakfast of eggs, blueberry muffins, English muffins, fruit and OJ. It was okay, but I didn’t care for it so much. Dad and Josh seemed to like it a lot. We were only going about 42 miles this second day and wanted to get there early so that we could swim in the river and do our wash. It was cool to start with and we rode hard for the first hour, going about 10 to 12 miles per hour. I started to get tired and so we slowed down.

It was beautiful along this portion of the trail. We saw several deer and some more waterfalls. We stopped at a KOA campground for our first rest stop. It was much further than I expected after listening to Dad tell about it. It was already hot and I couldn’t wait for a break. We bought a candy bar and a pop plus ate some of the trail mix that we had made before leaving on this trip. We also called Mom from there, since Dad remembered that our phones did not get any service in
Ohiopyle. After riding again for about a half an hour, we stopped at another fairly large waterfall. Another man also stopped and I think his name was Joe Bougrich. He took our picture standing under the waterfalls and then we took his picture there. He was a very nice man, a marathon runner, and we talked for a while. Later on we stopped once more for some of our trail mix and some water. It seemed like forever to get to Ohiopyle, but actually it was just a little after 2.

We stayed in a guest house called the Ferncliff. We went over to the information booth downtown to ask about a natural waterslide in the area. They told us that it was about a half mile down the main road. We walked down there and it took us about ten minutes.

The slide was super fun. The first time down we stopped at the halfway point in a larger pool. The water was low and Dad said that we might get hurt on the second half. However, after watching several others go down the rest of the way, Josh and I decided to try it also. I did hit my face on a rock and crushed my one toe a little bit but it was really fun. We then walked back to our room and took showers. Then we ordered pizza and salads.

Tuesday July 19—Third Day

It thunderstormed last night. I was a little restless last night, but slept well. We woke up at 6 a.m. We ate pop tarts and milk and had a slice of banana bread that they had left for us. We were out of the room by 6:50. It was still cool. Since we had such a long way to go, Dad wanted to start out at a fast pace again while it was still cool. We started out at about a 12 mile per hour pace for about an hour until we got to Confluence. Along the way we saw a deer and a few more waterfalls. It was very beautiful along this section. We then kept
going on at a slower pace until we got to Rockwood where we stopped at a gas station and got some Pringles, an ice cream Twix bar and a pop, plus we bought candy bars for later. It felt really good to get these snacks since we had already ridden nearly 30 miles so far. After this snack we slowed down even more, as it was getting hot again. We saw a few more waterfalls and it was still a very nice trail. We stopped at Meyersdale at Mile 42 for lunch. We went into town and ate at an old fashioned restaurant. They made us some really good hot dogs; we also ordered fries and Cokes. Afterward we walked our bikes up the very steep hill to the bike path. It was long, steep and hot. Next, we went through a bunch of tunnels and saw a lot of windmills along the top of some mountains. We then stopped at the Eastern Continental Divide, which was at mile 50 for the day. Now we had to ride 24 miles, all downhill, into Cumberland to end the day.

Soon afterward, we stopped at the Mason-Dixon Line which was near the Big Savage Tunnel. In the tunnel we had to turn our lights on. The tunnel was long, dark and cool. Once we got into Cumberland, we found our motel and got into our room. We had to carry our bikes up to the second floor – after such a long day, that was hard! We then walked over to a store where I got a bathing suit. Next
we walked to a deli and got sandwiches, chips and milkshakes; Dad bought a lemon meringue pie. We took this back to our room and ate. The sandwiches and milkshakes were really good, but the pie wasn’t even good enough to eat. We went to sleep early after going for a swim in their pool and sitting in the whirl pool.

Wed. July 20—Day Four

We woke up at 7 and went downstairs and had a good breakfast of waffles, bacon and OJ. We also each took an apple for a snack later. The first ten miles were very sloppy with lots of holes, bumps and mud. The canal along the trail was covered with a slimy green algae sheet. We did see lots and lots of turtles sitting on the rocks and fallen trees that were in the canal. We saw quite a few deer again this morning and many butterflies.

After about 17 miles we stopped at Old Town. Dad and Josh remembered that there wasn’t any place to get food in the middle of the day today. In Old Town they had a sign out that they served food in their school. We rode over there and Dad and I each got a piece of apple pie and ice cream. Josh got a chicken tenders and fries meal. We left Old Town about 11:15.

There must have been a bad storm along here recently, because the trail and next to the trail was strewn with downed trees and branches. In several places men were sawing up the trees; in some spots, we needed to get off of our bicycles and pick them up over the fallen trees.

The trail continued to be muddy, bumpy and slippery for the next 30 miles. We stopped twice for snacks and drinks. The weather was in the mid-80s. We next came to the Paw Paw Tunnel. Josh and Dad had fallen in it last year, so we got
off of our bicycles and walked them through it. It is a long, dark, narrow tunnel and very bumpy. It was even difficult to try to walk through it. I got out of the tunnel first and climbed up the side blocks to the top of the tunnel opening.

After the tunnel the trail got even bumpier with lots of rocks and tree roots. After a while Josh’s bungee cord for his pannier broke and it got caught in his spokes. Luckily, he noticed it right away and stopped. Dad and Josh got it apart with a knife and then did something to make it work. Then at a boat ramp we stopped for a snack and then we jumped in the river for about twenty minutes to cool off since it was so hot. It felt thrilling and Josh and I wanted to float down the river to our next stop. The water was a perfect temperature; not too cold but cool enough that it really refreshed us all.

Shortly afterwards we rode to the other side of the canal and we were now on a paved bike trail. When we got to Hancock we stopped at the bike shop and they placed a rubber tire where the bungee cord had gone; they did not charge us anything. I looked around the bike shop while they were fixing it and bought a T-shirt. We then biked through the town to the Great American Motel.

After we got our room, we hosed off our bicycles and then walked across the road to have a spaghetti dinner. The salads were very good and they gave us huge servings of the spaghetti. I also got a strawberry lemonade and it was wonderful. It came in a huge mason jar and had chunks of real strawberries in it. We went back to our room showered and watched some TV and also called home. We had biked about 61 miles today, but it had seemed much longer than that.

Thursday July 21—Day Five

We woke up early today at 6:50, dressed and went over to the office for breakfast. We got bagels and peanut butter and OJ. We then got our bicycles out of their garage and packed them
up. While we were packing, the motel’s cat came into our room and drank out of the toilet. Then the cat wouldn’t leave our room and crawled under the bed; it was hard to get it out of the room.

The first ten miles out of Hancock were on a paved bike path. Dad’s brakes didn’t work well, and as we went down a steep hill to transfer to the C & O bike trail, Dad couldn’t stop and crashed into a gate at the entrance. Both he and the bike were OK, fortunately.

We rode to Williamsport after about 23 miles. We arrived there about 10:45. We stopped at the corner café. Josh and I ordered corn dogs and chips while Dad got a grilled cheese sandwich. We also ordered PB & J sandwiches and candy bars to go since Josh and Dad also remembered that there were no food stops later on this afternoon. We stopped at mile 81 to eat lunch. The mile markers were now going down to zero, which would be our final destination of Washington, DC. At mile 81 we refreshed ourselves as we plunged into the Potomac River for a dip. It felt very good and refreshing once again. As we were leaving, it was uphill to the bike trail and Dad’s chain snapped in two, causing him to fall. We were in the middle of nowhere. Dad quickly made a decision and told Josh and me to continue on together, that we were about twenty miles from Harper’s Ferry. He said that he would somehow find a ride to the nearest bike shop and meet us in Harper’s Ferry sometime later.

Josh and I rode hard and only stopped a few times for water and bathroom breaks. When we made it to Harper’s Ferry, we had to haul our bikes up two or three flights of stairs onto a railroad bridge that would take us into the town. We sat down in the shade next to the first building we encountered, as the temperature was once again in the nineties. We waited there for Dad for about a half hour. When he showed up, he said that he had ridden very hard and fast the last twelve miles trying to catch up to us. He told us that he had gotten a ride into Shepardstown by a park ranger. He went into the bike shop there and they had quickly repaired his chain. We
then walked our bikes up a very gnarly steep hot hill to get to the Appalachian Trail Store because Dad wanted to get Mom a T-shirt from there. We then rode on to the Econolodge. It was pretty nice and we then ordered pizza and breadsticks from Menza’s Pizzeria to be delivered. It was the most heavenly tasting pizza that any of us had ever eaten. We were so excited to get to Washington, DC the following day, especially since it was getting hotter and more humid every day. We rode some 66 miles on this 90-degree, very humid day.

Friday July 22—Day Six

We woke up early again today at 6:30. We went down for breakfast and it was really good. I got waffles, a pastry, and OJ. It turned out to be a very, very, long, hard day. We left about 7:30. Already it was very humid. We carried our bikes down the stairs to the bike trail and rode to White’s Ferry. The trail along this section was in pretty good shape. At the ferry we bought some candy bars and drinks plus tickets to go across the river into Virginia.

A friend of Dad’s had told him that there was a nice paved bike trail from Leesburg into DC, which would make the last day easier. We rode into Leesburg and there were two different roads into the city. We took the right one but couldn’t find the bike trail. Dad asked at least two or three people where it was but none of them knew about it. We then rode along a highway to the other side of the city. We stopped at a Roy Rogers for a lunch and Dad asked the checkout boy; finally he told us how to get there. By now it was very humid and in the mid-nineties.

Once we got to the bike trail there were no signs indicating which direction was DC. Dad zoomed ahead to ask a rider ahead of us which direction to go and sure enough we had picked the wrong direction. It was now nearly 100 degrees and very humid. There were heat warnings out for this area. The bike path stated that it was 33.5 miles to its end. The trail followed next to a large electrical line. It was mostly flat but with little hills or rises scattered throughout. I felt like
I was going to die; the hills were so hard for me to ride up as it was so hot and humid with absolutely no shade at all. This path was also blacktop, so the heat bounced off the pavement and hit us. We stopped at mile 20 at a Dairy Queen and got slushies and some cold water bottles.

After leaving the DQ we were now going very slowly because of me and I felt exhausted. Dad and Josh are taking turns trying to cheer me up and encourage me, but I just wanted to stop and be done. Also, almost everyone on the trail was mean and not friendly to us. Dad kept saying hello to everyone but no one would respond. Finally one family returned our greeting and it did cheer me up.

We then stopped at another rest stop in some town and we rinsed our heads and faces off in a drinking fountain. As we got closer to the end of this trail there were many more roads that crossed this bike trail and we had to continually stop and start again to cross them. This was very aggravating and this trail seemed to go on forever and ever. We also did not notice any more mile markers and it felt like we would never get to the end of it. Also we could see no visible signs of the DC monuments which we were expecting.

Finally the trail ended and we were expecting to be in DC, but we were not! We were in Mt. Vernon. We started out on the Mt. Vernon bike trail and Dad asked several people how far this trail was and most said they thought it was another 6 miles to DC. We then stopped at a gas station for another cold drink. We were all very discouraged at this point and Dad just kept pushing us to keep going. I just wanted to stop so very badly and I was not sure how I was still pedaling. It was like a sauna out there and my legs were completely exhausted.

Finally, then we saw the top of the Washington Monument and that helped us to keep going. We crossed the Arlington Memorial Bridge which was right next to the Reagan Airport. We came out at the Jefferson Memorial at about four o’clock. I desired so badly to go directly to
our hotel, but Dad stated that it was still some two miles away and on the other side of DC. He said that since we were here, we might as well do a little sightseeing.

We walked up and took some photos. The people there just ignored our bicycles and that made it hard to get through the crowds. It was hard to believe how many people were out looking and walking around in this terribly hot weather. We made our way over to the Washington Monument and took another photo. We then went over to Tenth Street and Dad did not recognize where our hotel was. Dad then stopped and asked a street worker but they did not know about the location of our hotel. We kept going and just as I was ready to just sit down and quit, Dad spotted the hotel. The Washington Court Hotel was its name and we had arrived at about 5. Two very nice men recognized Dad and Josh from last year and they were very nice to us. They could not believe that I had ridden all that way, especially in this weather. We were given a spacious room with a nice shower and a view of the Capitol. Dad and Josh then went out and bought subs, chips and drinks. While they did that I showered and then as we ate, we watched “Treehouse Makers” on the TV until we went to sleep. Of course we called Mom and Jenna and told them all about our day. WE DID IT!

After a day of sightseeing, we drove home in a van Dad had rented. The trip overall was really fun and I’m glad that I did it. I have a lot of very good memories from this experience and thought that it was amazing. When someone asks me about it, they always have questions about how I did it and where I stayed every night. I love thinking back to the good moments, but I am glad that the hard parts are all over. I am really glad that I did this trip and I am sure that I will share these memories and my photos for the rest of my life. I am thankful that my Mom allowed me to go and thankful also to have spent an entire week with my brother and Dad doing this bicycle trip.