

Living the lessons of a life still cherished



Glen Lapp

*Former city resident, now in Ghana, remembers
MCC worker and cousin Glen Lapp.*

BY JOE LAPP
Special to the Sunday News

Ten years ago this August, I rode my bicycle out the front door of my cousin Ernie Lapp's duplex on Pleasure Road on the eastern side of Lancaster city for a long bicycle ride.

But this wasn't a normal morning meander through the picturesque county countryside. Instead, it was the start of a ride clear across the United States to Seattle and then down the West Coast to San Francisco.

Ernie's brother Glen Lapp, a Lancaster native and a much more

adventurous soul than I, convinced me to try the journey. I had never been on a multiday bike trek before, or even pedaled more than 60 miles in one day. Glen assured me, however, that I could "get in shape on the road."

At first clinging for dear life to Glen's back wheel, eventually confident enough to do lead rides of my own, we weathered heat, thunderstorms, careless drivers, the endless flats of the Midwest, the mountainous wilds of Montana and a 17-degree night in a tent below Mount Rainier before end-

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Lapp: Life remembered

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ing our riding partnership in San Francisco in early December 2002.

Two years ago, Aug. 5, 2010, my cousin Glen died in Afghanistan.

A Mennonite Central Committee worker, he and nine others in an 11-member medical team were shot and killed by militants in a random act of war violence. Unarmed humanitarian workers, they were returning from an arduous trek into the remote Nuristan area, backpacking medical aid to mountain villages where health care is still an unexpected luxury.

It was just the sort of adventure Glen loved.

He grew up in Lancaster County living up to the outdoor exploits of his older brother Jerry, who played soccer at Lancaster Mennonite High School, and Ernie, who became a fixture in the area bike racing scene during the '90s. Increasingly, the heights called to Glen. He climbed Mount Rainier, trekked in Nepal, and summited mountains in Chile with celebrated explorer Phil Buck.

Though my family hails from the Menno-farmed valleys east of Lancaster city, I had grown up, mostly, in urban Washington, D.C. I was not an outdoors kind of guy. When, on our first day of riding on that cross-country trip in 2002, Glen stopped to pee in a roadside cornfield, I balked.

City boy that I was I wanted a toilet, a wash basin and some privacy.

I didn't really think much of Lancaster at the time. Having left behind both the Gap-area farm fields of my father's youth and the conservative Mennonite tradition that he and my mother imported into their small missionary church in the D.C. ghetto, I considered Lancaster's rural and small-city life unappealing.

But Glen, on that trip, changed my mind.

He had been leaving and coming back to the county for decades. Between his increasingly international adventures, he always returned to his brother Ernie's house on Pleasure Road, working as a night nurse in the intensive care unit at Lancaster Regional Medical Center and earning his Realtor's license. He knew more of the world than I did but still loved Lancaster.

Like his taste for adventure, some of that love rubbed off on me. Glen's dedication to his hometown, as well as the small-town generosity we experienced on our bike ride across the U.S., convinced me Lancaster might not be such a bad place after all.

These days I live in the West African nation of Ghana where, with public toilets none too plentiful, everyone pees by the side of the road. I've been having Glen-inspired adventures overseas ever since; four years after our bike trip, Glen's traveling example motivated me to move to Pakistan, then Burundi and Ghana, following my world-wandering wife.

But every summer I yearn for Lancaster's fresh-picked sweet corn, every tropical "winter" for the bleakness of leaf-lorn oak limbs against gray skies. I wish for homemade root beer and fresh cream-filled powdered doughnuts from Amish farm sales. I miss the sight of plain-cut dresses drying on long rolling clotheslines and the taste of hazelnut-flavored hot chocolate from the Prince Street Café, a favorite lounge spot for my cousin.

Glen died a few days after I moved to Accra, Ghana's capital. On my unplanned trip back to Lancaster for his memorial service, the nostalgic clip-clop of horse hooves pulling buggies mixed in my mind with the awful staccato of automatic weapons from Afghanistan.

These days, 10 years after our once-in-a-lifetime, two-wheel wander across America, I grieve Glen's loss as a loss of memory. Since he is gone, I can no longer call him up to ask which corn field it was that we stopped at on

our way out of Lancaster County, or laugh about the time we tented directly beneath a "No Camping" sign, or reminisce about the florid-faced North Dakota combine farmer who let two strangers soak in his hot tub and sleep on his couch.

My diaries of that trip molder, now, in my sister's Leola basement. Glen's memories, like his ashes, are spread to the winds.

I've had adventures in Ghana since Glen died — including multiday bike trips — and have joined in a few more of Ernie and Jerry's customary pedal-charges over Amish country roads. But it's just not the same without Glen in the world.

His absence remains a loss to me and to those who love Lancaster.



Joe Lapp

Since 2006, writer, photographer and blogger Joe Lapp has been accompanying his wife, an international humanitarian aid worker, around the world. Visit his website at lappjoe.com or read his blog at goinghanna.blogspot.com. In addition, the annual Pedal Harder Bicycle ride in Glen Lapp's memory will be held Oct. 6. Contact his parents, Mary and Marv Lapp, at 394-5505 for more information.