



John Pratt/Pursuit Photo

local heroes

important a conservation tool as binoculars. A mountain bike brings you to the animals. You move quietly and quickly, so you can get closer than when you shuffle along on your feet. We are the heirs to the conservation movement developed by the hikers in the 1920s and '30s."

In '91 Stein joined an advocacy group called the Coalition of Connecticut Bicyclists and went to work. He lobbied land managers, attended meeting after meeting, maintained trails, even promoted a mountain bike race and donated proceeds to a local land trust.

From his newspaper work he knew a key to influencing state policy would be to gain the trust of the Connecticut Forest and Park Association, a quiet but enormously influential private environmental group that Stein calls "more important to Connecticut than the Sierra Club is to California." Building on the credibility he'd earned from his environmental reporting, Stein worked hard to convince the CFPA that mountain bikers wanted to safeguard the land, too. When it finally came time for the state to consider a trails-policy change that would benefit mountain biking, the CFPA didn't oppose it. The move gained approval last September. Now trails are open unless otherwise posted, with a few exceptions such as the Appalachian Trail.

"This is the kind of policy IMBA dies for," says Blumenthal. "It was a big victory. It's very symbolic."

Ironically, just as the policy changed, Stein moved to western Massachusetts to work for another newspaper—and, no doubt, for another land-access cause. He leaves behind a wonderful legacy for Connecticut mountain bikers.

bad for a state so small you could pedal your road bike across it in a day. True, the prohibition against mountain bikes had been largely ignored and rarely enforced, but as the sport continued to grow the ban hung like a scythe over mountain bikers' heads.

Getting it reversed would be tough. "In Connecticut, all the forces were working against mountain biking," says Tim Blumenthal, executive director of the International Mountain Bicycling Association. "It's got high population density, limited public land, and a long New England tradition of hiking."

Fortunately, Stein possessed a rare set of skills for the job. A newspaper reporter who specializes in environmental coverage and a keen bird-watcher who studied wildlife biology in college, he's likable, articulate, knowledgeable, and well-connected. And most important, passionate.

"I'm a flag-flying tree-hugger," Stein says, "but it's not right that mountain bikes were banned. The mountain bike has the potential to become as

"My job is to make sure everybody feels good. It's amazing what people can do if you keep showing them results. People need to be empowered."

— Susie Stephens

[Susie Stephens]

Working at a refugee camp in Thailand might seem far removed from lobbying a state legislator in Olympia, Washington, but for Susie Stephens it's not much distance at all.

While playing in her junior-high orchestra, Stephens met a group of Japanese exchange students. Their friendship led to Stephens spending a summer in Japan, sparking a love affair with Asia. She took Asian studies in college, traveled the continent for a year, and returned to live there for 3½ years. She taught English to refugees, met lepers, lived among poor people who "spent their whole life scrubbing the sidewalk with a toothbrush."

There she'd fallen in love with bicycling, too, especially in China, where bikes are the lifeblood that courses through the country's arteries. Here was the bicycle's potential made real.

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When Stephens returned to the U.S., she gravitated to a part-time position at the Northwest Bicycle Foundation, which was soon to merge with the Bicycle Federation of Washington to become the Northwest Bicycle Federation (NowBike). When executive director Don Bullard left 1½ years later, Stephens was torn between applying for the position or returning to Asia. Luckily for Washington state cyclists, she opted to stay.

In a way, though, her decision—to work for more livable communities at home—kept her close to Asia and what she'd learned there.

"I'd gained a strong appreciation for Buddhist ethics," says Stephens, 30. "The community spirit is very internal. When you make yourself better, you make others better."

Stephens set about transforming what had been virtually a one-person operation into a statewide organization committed to making the Northwest a better place for cycling. Why the need for such a group? With so many cycling-related decisions made at the state level—from kids' educational programs to what to put in the driver's manual—cyclists need a strong, credible, consistent voice in the legislature. A statewide organization also links disparate, often isolated local groups.

Stephens began attracting volunteers, recruiting a board of directors, building consensus with groups as diverse as PTAs and the Automobile Club of America, lobbying state legislators, and shoring up support among NowBike's 500 individual members and 7 club memberships representing another 7,000 cyclists.

"My job is to orchestrate and make sure everybody feels good," says Stephens. "It's amazing what people can do if you keep doing that and keep showing them results. People need to be empowered."

"Susie is a whirlwind of activity," says Gandy of the BFA. "She's one of the prototypes of the professional bike advocate."

Last fall Stephens staged a 2-day advocacy conference attended by 315 people, including representatives from cities, transit agencies, and bike clubs. She holds an annual fund-raising auction (last year 300 attendees paid \$25 a ticket; the auction raised \$20,000). She works with a staff that could grow this year to 2 part-time workers and one full-timer, with a budget of about \$160,000. She works with NowBike's commuter specialist, who visits local companies to spread the 2-wheeled gospel. She alerts constituents to legislative threats, such as the state lawmaker who tried—unsuccessfully—to divert \$5 million from cycling projects, allegedly describing cyclists as "a pain in the butt all over the state" and suggesting that "a good hard bumper works well" to get them out of the way.

"Susie has a clear idea of what she wants to do," says Cynthia Putnam, executive director of Seattle's 5,000-member Cascade Bicycle Club. "And she's effective at mobilizing people around the seed of an idea and then helping them develop it. She's great."

Yes, she is. So are Stein, Price, and all of cycling's other local heroes. To them we say thanks. For everything. ■

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