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The Natchez Trace was a magnet for Dr. Gary Holdiness, who was killed by a distracted driver while riding near his hometown in Mississippi. Now, his friends and family want a safer Trace in his memory.

On May 6, 2012, Dr. Gary Holdiness, 54, swung a leg over his Pinarello Prince bicycle and left his home in Kosciusko, Mississippi, for a ride in the nearby Natchez Trace Parkway National Park.

The weather was sunny and dry, just the kind of beautiful spring day when the deeply religious Holdiness told his wife Donna he could see the “fingerprints of God.”

“He would do it on the Trace,” Donna Holdiness said. “He would say, ‘I saw a white crane in a flock of gray cranes standing there beautiful like Christ in all the gray.’ That’s what the Lord says, ‘My fingerprints are on everything. Open your eyes to see me.’ Gary did it so well.”

At approximately 12:40 PM, a 17-year-old boy driving a Toyota FJ Cruiser at 78 MPH, was texting his girlfriend. He slammed into Holdiness from behind without braking, bouncing him off the Toyota’s hood and throwing him 175 feet, tumbling through the grass next to the roadway, killing him.

The speed limit on the Parkway is 50 MPH.

The carbon fiber Pinarello was shattered into pieces, the top tube, downtube, seatstays and seat tube all broken, the crankset and spokes bent and destroyed, and the rear derailleur broken off.

This all according to an investigation by the National Park Service.

At the scene, the 17-year-old driver estimated he was traveling at about 60 MPH and denied being on his phone or distracted. Instead he said Holdiness had “stumbled” while he was trying to pass him, swerving into the path of his Toyota where he couldn’t avoid hitting him.

Noting that Holdiness was an experienced cyclist, using “clip-in style shoes and pedals” on his bicycle, the investigator found it “unlikely” that Holdiness would have missed the pedal, causing him to swerve in front of the oncoming

# A Tale of the Trace

by Dan D’Ambrosio

DENNIS COELLO

vehicle. The investigation also showed Holdiness was struck next to the fog line of the roadway, not near the center of the lane as the young driver claimed.

Finally, phone records subpoenaed by the U.S. Attorney’s Office showed the driver was “actively texting during the minutes prior to the crash,” according to BreezyNews.com, the local news source.

On July 1, 2013, BreezyNews.com reported the young man who killed Holdiness pled guilty to reckless driving, speeding, unsafe operation, and failure to provide three feet while passing a bicyclist, a Mississippi law. He was placed on probation for three years and ordered to pay a \$10,000 fine.

As a condition of his probation, the driver, who was a minor at the time of the accident, is required to take part in a series of public service announcements concerning safe driving on the Parkway.

In April, another bicyclist was killed on the Natchez Trace Parkway, the second in less than a year. 52-year-old-George Wimberly of Bay Minette, Alabama, was riding near milepost 77 when he was struck by the driver of a Nissan Versa.

Holdiness was hit near milepost 156.

The death of Dr. Holdiness left the little town of Kosciusko stunned. Like most small-town doctors, Holdiness was held in high regard by his colleagues at the Kosciusko Medical Clinic.

“It was just a deep sadness,” remembered Claude Gunter of the aftermath of the accident. “In these little towns, people like Gary don’t get replaced, they really don’t. It has affected the whole community.”

Gunter, 61, owns a clothing and sportswear store in Kosciusko, where he raised his family alongside Gary and Donna Holdiness and their two young boys. Gunter grew up playing basketball, football, and baseball, “all the small-town sports.”

Holdiness, said Gunter, specialized in geriatrics and “thought outside the box,” often rollerbladed down the hallways of the local hospital. He also

often encouraged his patients to take up cycling. That was definitely thinking outside the box in rural Mississippi where Holdiness had grown up poor, putting himself through medical school at Ole Miss.

“People riding bikes were thought of as weird,” Gunter said. “Gary broke the mold on all that. He would have had all of us cycling.”

When Gunter was having trouble with arthritis in his knee three years ago, Holdiness told him he could give him a shot for the pain, but a bicycle would heal his knee. With the encouragement of another friend who was one of Holdiness’s converts, Gunter started off on a spinning bike.

“We got the knee cleared up in about three weeks,” he said.

From there Gunter discovered the pleasures of the open road and particularly of the nearby Natchez Trace.

“I have a couple of really nice bicycles,” he said. “I have a Litespeed titanium bike, and I just picked up a Wilier, an Italian frame.”

Gunter said he has put more than 16,000 miles on his Litespeed.

“I live to ride distances,” he said. “When I’m feeling good, I like to go at least 30 to 35 miles. A lot of times before work, I can ride to Holly Hill and back, a total of 14 to 15 miles to get loose. It’s easy and not much traffic. That’s where Gary was headed. I pass by where he got hit every day.”

Following Holdiness’s death, and the death less than a year later of George Wimberly, Gunter and others felt compelled to take action to make the Trace safer. Gunter reached out to Noah Budnick of Transportation Alternatives in New York City who put him in touch with Adventure Cycling Association.

Gunter’s email to Budnick was straightforward and heartfelt: “As you would know, Mississippi is a small, poor state with few cyclists, even though the Natchez Trace happens to be some of the best cycling in the country. If anything really gets done, we will need extra help. Please send me who I should

contact with the group you mentioned, and also I hope you would encourage their involvement since your name was given me. To be honest, it is very easily (sic) for Mississippi to ‘fall through the cracks’ in today’s world and I understand why.”

It didn’t take much encouragement for Adventure Cycling to get involved in the effort to make the Trace safer. Executive Director Jim Sayer’s simple response to Budnick in April was, in part, “No problem – will make it happen.”

The task was given to Adventure Cycling’s Director of Travel Initiatives Ginny Sullivan. Sullivan started talking to Gunter, who told her about Dr. Holdiness and the legacy of cycling he left behind.

Sullivan also contacted park administrators for the Trace, and on April 30 the National Park Service and Adventure Cycling signed a formal agreement to work together promoting bicycle tourism in the national parks, including safety projects.

The five-year agreement “builds on an existing partnership and enables the Adventure Cycling to work with the National Park Service to build a nationwide bicycle route network through national parks,” a press release said.

Under the terms of the agreement, Adventure Cycling will work with superintendents of individual parks on designating routes and replicating “the most successful management practices along the Adventure Cycling Route Network.”

In the case of the Natchez Trace, Sullivan pointed out the route is already part of Adventure Cycling’s Great River South and Underground Railroad routes.

“Over the years, it’s been a bucket list place for cyclists,” Sullivan said. “Hundreds of cyclists come from all over the world every year. Park staff recognize that. Local cyclists use it all the time as a place to go to stay healthy and enjoy outside activity.”

Dale Wilkerson, park administrative officer for the Natchez Trace, said the park doesn’t track the number of cy-



clists who use the Trace every year, but he puts the number at between 500,000 and 1,000,000 cyclists a year, based on anecdotal evidence.

"We think we have a great resource that is a perfect venue for bicyclists, but we want to be sure we're managing it in a way that ensures mixed use — motor vehicles, bicycles, and others," Wilkerson said.

The Natchez Trace welcomed a new superintendent, Mary Risser, in January, but Wilkerson said last year he had already talked to her about the joint effort with Adventure Cycling and she was "excited about it."

"I expect things to continue right on as normal after a pause for changing bosses to let everybody take a breath," he said.

The agreement between Adventure Cycling and the Natchez Trace calls for a three-pronged plan of action. The first strategy will be to educate city officials, business owners, and residents in the gateway communities along the Trace about cycling.

Second, the plan calls for installing signs and "sharrows" along the Trace, including signage that say, "Cyclists May Use Full Lane," which is the law in Mississippi. The sharrows — images of bicycles painted on the roadway — are planned for the center of each travel lane to communicate to drivers that cyclists are on the roadway.

The third strategy is to include educational materials about cycling in all of the Trace's visitor centers. There may also be such efforts as a group of cyclists riding the entire 440-mile length of the Trace, hosting gateway community meetings. Perhaps they could also

be joined by a local group of automobile enthusiasts.

Sullivan said some \$17,000 had been raised by cyclists in the name of Dr. Holdiness, which his wife Donna asked to go toward making improvements on the parkway for cyclists, such as the ones being contemplated in the agreement between the Park Service and Adventure Cycling.

Gunter points out that cyclists must make sure they are visible in the darkening shadows cast across many sections of the tree-lined Trace.

"Plenty of drivers are conscientious and scared of hitting cyclists because there are so many shadows on the Trace," Gunter said. "It's a very big problem. Most local cyclists have lights."

Holdiness was wearing a yellow jersey when he was hit and had lights on his bike, although there was no way for investigators to know whether those lights were on.

Donna Holdiness is trying to prepare herself for a meeting this year with the parents of the young man who killed her husband. They wrote a letter to her in June 2012 after the funeral in May, saying they knew the timing was not yet right but when she was ready they wanted to sit down and talk to her.

"I have not contacted them," Holdiness said. "The federal prosecutors asked me to wait."

After the driver pled guilty, the prosecutors told Holdiness his parents were "broken," but warned her "the boy is not too much affected."

"That's what they told me, 'You might want to wait some more,'" Holdiness said.

And she has. But now she is deter-

mined to meet with the parents some time this year.

"I have to let them know that they are forgiven and I hold no malice," Holdiness said.

Holdiness herself lost a 17-year-old son to a car accident. Her son Matthew was driving the car with four other boys in it. Three died and two lived.

"I went to every parent and faced them and said, 'What can I do for you?'" she said.

The boy who hit Holdiness's husband has not written to her. She doesn't want a letter that someone else forces him to write.

Holdiness thinks back to the moment when she had to call her other son Samuel to tell him his father was dead. Samuel was in South Carolina with his wife Amber, working as a medical resident. Holdiness was at an Ole Miss baseball game. She runs the booster club for the baseball program at the university.

Fuller Smith, a young coach with Ole Miss, was with Holdiness and told her she had to call her son.

"I said, 'Fuller, I can't,'" Holdiness remembered. "He said, 'I will dial the number.' He handed me the phone and got down on his knees and started praying for the strength to tell my son his father was killed. It was the most amazing thing. I was calm, clear, and in control. I felt the arms of God almighty around me as that boy was on his knees praying strength for me."

In July 2015, Samuel Holdiness will take his father's place at the Kosciusko Medical Clinic. **AC**

*Dan D'Ambrosio is a staff writer covering business for the Burlington Free Press in Burlington, Vermont.*

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