Hardly Just Another Bike Ride

Brendan Leonard rides to help troubled kids because he knows—better than most of us—what they're going through.

Brendan Leonard's story is an archetype that Bicycling readers know well: It's the tale of a young man whose life was changed by a bike. But there's a twist to Leonard's arc as a rider that's a bit unusual—and worth hearing. Like a number of the Biketown participants we've profiled over the years, Leonard took the strength he discovered in the saddle and turned his bike into a tool for the greater good. He didn't just get fit, or crank up his wattage, or learn to tear through the mountains. He did those things, sure, but he has also hit the road to affect the lives of teens—challenged ones like he used to be. As we speak—literally, this very moment—his effort is inspiring a wide network of outdoor enthusiasts to pitch in.

Leonard grew up in Iowa, aimless, troubled, into drugs and alcohol. Incarcerated at the age of 23, he was destined to be another overlooked statistic. But an opportunity to participate in outdoor adventure—cycling, climbing, and backpacking—was the lifeline he needed. These outings literally saved his life, and he soon determined to give back what he'd gained. Today, Leonard works for a nonprofit based in Denver called Big City Mountaineers (BCM), a team dedicated to helping urban teenagers transform their lives through outdoor experiences. Week after week, he's been fighting a tough economy to raise money and find volunteer mentors for the organization. It hasn't been easy: Charitable giving plummeted 30 to 40 percent in 2009, making it harder than ever to expose underprivileged teens to bikes and hikes.