

“Where Visions Cease, The People Perish”

The 10-year story of T.H.O.R.

Trails Have Our Respect is ten years old this year. Thanks to the vision of one, many people have had the opportunity to know what it's like to ride among the trees.

Trails Have Our Respect, T.H.O.R., as we've come to know it, was the idea of one person. That one person was the late Tony Naikelis. According to some of the early members, Tony was a trail visionary; an experienced rider, who was ahead of his time. Because of his natural ability, he'd dream up grand ideas for building trail systems, but had to be reminded that he wasn't the only one that would be riding the trails. Little did he know how many people eventually would.

In the early days, before THOR, aside from state parks, only bootleg motor cross trails existed along with equestrian and the occasional hiking trails. Nothing in the way of proper trail building technique was used nor discussed. Many early mountain bike riders just rode what they could find. Nobody asked permission and no land managers were approached, so mountain bikers were seen as rebels and because the sport was so new, much hoopla was being made of the “damage” they were causing the trails.

Today, we wouldn't think of creating a trail without forethought or permission. It seems preposterous but back then they had to start somewhere. IMBA, the International Mountain Bike Association, visited this area around 1997. Tony Naikelis went to one of the meetings which ignited a fire that spread easily. Fueled by the passion for the sport, mixed with the respect for the land, he had found his calling. A few of his close buddies, names we've heard many times, joined in his vision: Anne Savory, Steve Dickey, Mike Resetar, and later Kent McNeill, Gregg Shimonek, and Dean Geise.

But it took a while for the organization to get going. Tony got some start up money from a local sponsor which he carried around for a while. In order to get non-profit status they needed a name. Anne, Steve and Tony wracked their brains late one night after Bike Specialties, the shop where Tony worked, had closed. Anne actually thought of the name. “There were no blogs. It was just us. We liked it and it stuck”, said Anne. But Tony was notorious for being big on ideas but lacked the focus and the organization. Enter Mike Resetar, or “Rusty” as he's known in the local bike scene. He was the man with the plan. So, together with Mike's organization, and Steve's work ethic the idea of a trail care crew was taking shape.

Ten years ago, like today, it seemed the same few did most of the work. But they never knew any different. Kent McNeill put ads in the Omaha World Herald asking for volunteers to help with Platte just to keep the trails from being closed down. Jesse Peterson, or Jose as he's known, started working on the trails there

after seeing park rangers helping riders out with broken collar bones and wrists. He feared the worst for the future of riding at Platte so he took it upon himself to download an aerial view of the park and map out the loop we know today. It wasn't until after hearing about trails at Lewis and Clark that Jesse met Tony and learned about T.H.O.R. and sustainable trail design. Later Jesse became the area representative for IMBA. The T.H.O.R. family was growing.

In October of 1997 this area was hit with an early winter ice storm. Many of the trails were destroyed and this is when T.H.O.R. really got its momentum. Word got out about this trail group and as riders experienced the trails that were being built and maintained, more and more people got involved. "A six hour day wasn't unusual back then" said Gregg "Shim" Shimonek. "Most people don't realize the huge difference between Lewis and Clark (L&C) circa 1995 versus 2007. There's a huge difference. I was in awe when I got to ride something new that totally blew my mind."

Tony really had a vision for what he wanted to see. And although strategy was rarely discussed, what was being done in those first few years, the things that were really important in helping T.H.O.R. grow, a Harvard MBA couldn't have written a better road map for success: education, sustainable trail design and growing the sport of mountain biking and the time volunteer riders put forth. It was the vision of one that became a reality, due to the help of many which Tony had brought together.

Five years after the birth of T.H.O.R., at the age of 35, Tony tragically died of a fatal heart attack while swimming. It was a shock and the local bike community was rocked with sadness. His life and legacy was celebrated. He would have been forty this year. But Tony would not have wanted his fellow riders resting on their laurels. He would have wanted them to rub some dirt in their wounds and get on with it. And so, we have.

In the past five years since Tony's death, thanks in large part to Mike Resetar for picking up where Tony left off, and many more countless volunteers, new trails have been built and older trails expanded or improved. By-laws are in place, funds have been raised, trail head kiosks built, trail markers made. There is now a board, a president, a website, and a membership list that keeps growing and growing every year.

Tony would be proud of us. T.H.O.R. was his vision and although most people had to wait ten years to realize the vision, he and a few others saw it all along. Happy Birthday, T.H.O.R. Here's to ten more.

This story couldn't have been possible without the memory of Gregg Shimonek, Anne Savory, Mike Resetar and Jesse Petersen. Some of the passages are direct and paraphrased quotes from emails they sent to me.

Roxzanne Abbott