



“THERE WAS
A FEELING THAT
BICYCLING WAS
GOING TO GO
PLACES **IN NEW
YORK CITY**”

By Sam Slaton

Photographs of the 1977 and
1978 Tours by Steven Faust

**The origins of the
TD Five Boro Bike Tour,
as told by its founders and
those who were there.**

In 1977, when the plan was hatched for what would become the TD Five Boro Bike Tour, New York City was a very different place, and a forbidding one for aspiring cyclists. Nevertheless, a few passionate New Yorkers had the improbable idea to take some high school students on a ride around the city—and history was made. Here's what it was like back then, in their words.



STEVE BAUMAN

Chairman of the Bicycle Committee of the American Youth Hostel (AYH)

Just to fill out the schedule at the Hostel, I put in a ride—it was the last leap Sunday of the 20th century, February 29th, 1976. A 25-mile ride. A new guy named Sal Cirami came on the ride and evidently he liked the trip, went on a few others, and became a ride leader. Sal worked for the NYC Board of Education school lunch program and he met somebody who was tasked with creating a bicycle safety program for the Board of Ed.

ERIC PRAGER

Project Director, Bicycle Safety Education Program, New York City Board of Education

Riding in NYC was scary at that time. I used to commute by bike over the 59th St. Bridge going from Queens to Manhattan, and I would cross on the lower bridge where there were signs saying "don't do it." And on May 4th, 1969, I got hit by a car on the bridge. It was a hit-and-run kind of thing. That was tough ... no helmets at that time. But I kept riding.

In 1976, I went from teaching Physical Education at Julia-Richman High School to a position at the Bureau of Health and Physical Education at the Board of Education, in Brooklyn.

I wrote a grant to put bicycle safety programs into five high schools, one in each borough, and it was funded through the Board.

I got bikes donated, and I wanted to put kids on bikes and teach them how to ride safely in PE class. The grant also covered tools, so I was able to teach kids how to take bikes apart and how to repair them and how to fix flats. I started to do skills: how to ride slowly, how to stop, how to get off a bike safely, how to negotiate city streets safely, how to watch for cabs and doors opening up in your way.

In the spring of '76, I started my first bike-a-thon in Flushing Meadows Park. McDonald's was the sponsor, so Ronald McDonald was there.

Part of that ride, before you could get onto the ride itself, was passing a safety test. Once they passed that,

we tooled around Queens. It took only an hour or an hour and a half to do the 15-mile ride. It wasn't much of anything that first time.

Steve Bauman: Around February of '77, Sal brought Eric to a Bicycle Committee meeting and we gave Eric some of our materials. The Board of Education was interested in our Leadership Manual, but they couldn't copy it because we had a copyright on it, so that created the formal cooperation between AYH and the Board of Education Bike Safety Program. They had this program in five high schools—one in each borough, naturally—and John McCann, one of the principals of one of the high schools, also happened to be a Bicycle Committee leader.

Sal came up with the idea that the graduation from the bike program would be a ride that would go through all five boroughs.

Eric Prager: I had support from my boss to move this way [toward a Tour], but we didn't see it as being a self-sustaining huge event.

DAVE SCHLICHTING

AYH Bicycle Committee Leader

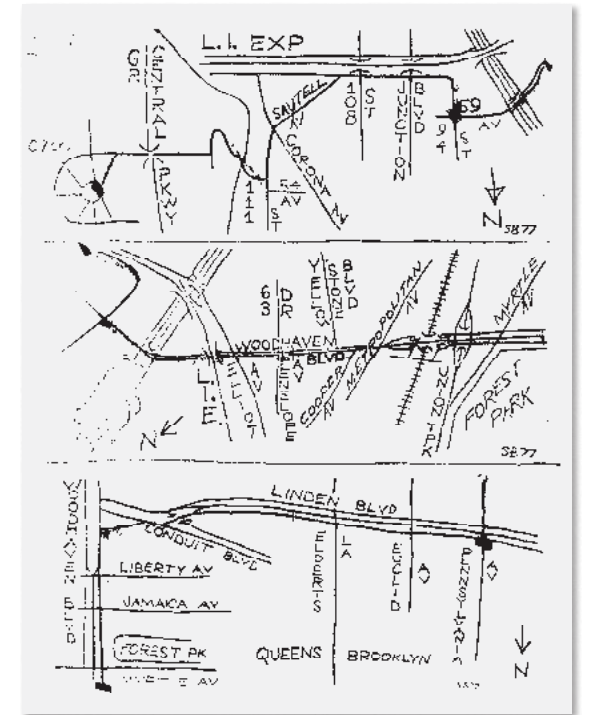
We didn't really know what it was going to be. The first one was sort of a prototype. I don't think anyone thought at that time that in 10 years this is gonna have 12,000 people in it.

Steve Bauman: The idea was we'd have a police escort—a Sergeant and three cops. One vehicle in front, one vehicle in back.

FRANK STOECKER

NYPD Sergeant

I was the Sergeant in the motorcycle district, which is the highway patrol in NYC. Basically, I handled the escorts for the dignitaries and the parades and all special events, so I was up there at the highway precinct on Grand



"The first official Five Boro Challenge took place on June 12, 1977, preceded by a bicycle clinic at the Unisphere on the day prior to the ride."

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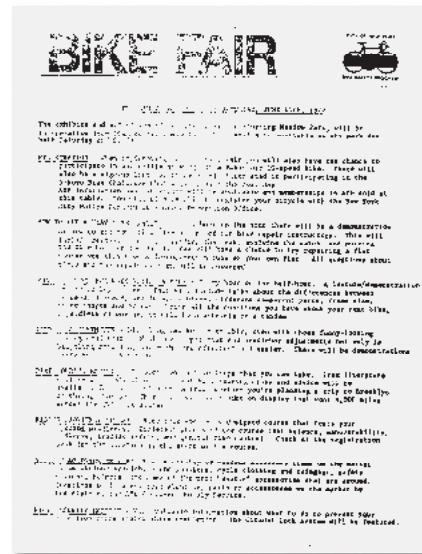
-Dave Schlichting

HISTORY OF THE TOUR

Central Parkway and these two young guys [Steve Bauman and Elliot Winick, Assistant Director of AYH and a member of the AYH Bicycle Committee] came up and they asked about this five borough bike tour. For us, it was, y'know, "What? Five boro bike tour?" New stuff, y'know. So I said, "Look, you gotta go to somebody higher on the food chain than me."

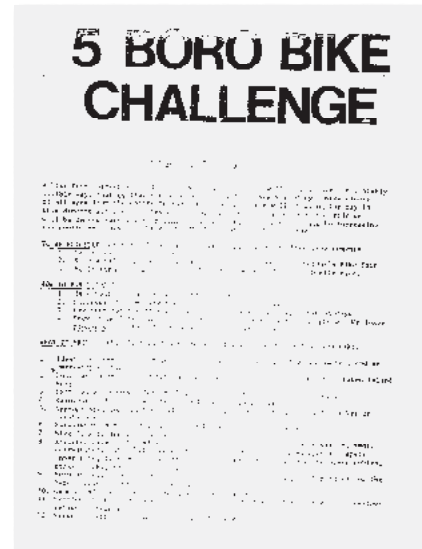
So they did, and we got an OK from the mayor's office.

Steve Bauman: The first Tour was a 2-day affair. The Saturday before the ride, we had a bicycle clinic at and around the Unisphere in Queens—get your bikes checked, go over a checklist of things that were right or wrong with the bike.



"I said, 'Look, you gotta go to somebody higher on the food chain than me.' So they did, and we got an OK from the Mayor's office."

-Frank Stoecker



LEN DIAMOND

Junior Leader of AYH Bike Committee (Len was only 17 at the time of the first Tour); current Chair of Bike New York's Board of Directors:

They'd set up all sorts of things for kids to do on bikes to teach them how to navigate around cones to simulate traffic. Someone came up with a facsimile of a car, and when you were riding by all of a sudden the car door would open up to teach you how to not get doored as you were riding down the street. It was a big program, and it was completely education focused.

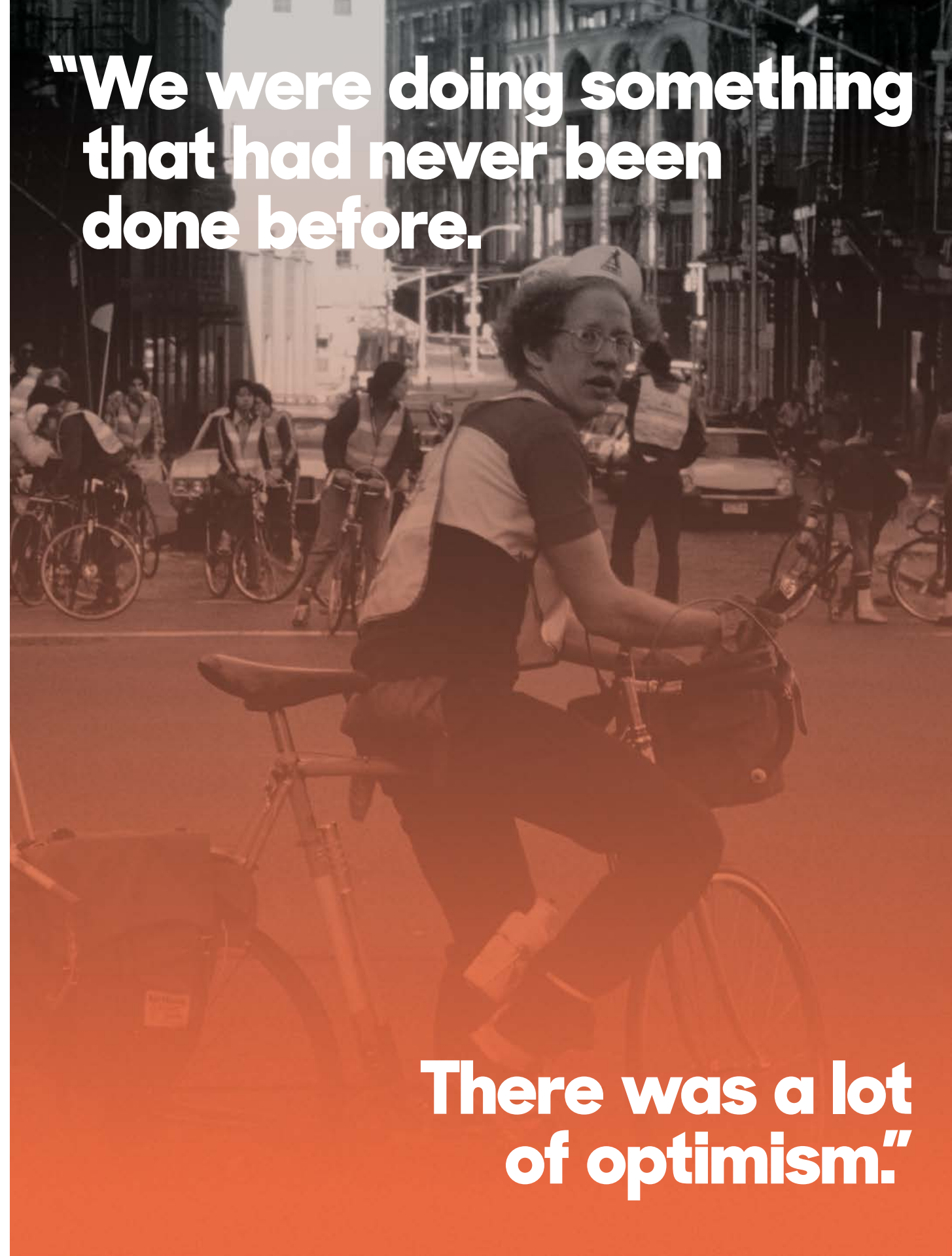
Steve Bauman: At that time we had some Bicycle Committee members who lived out on Long Island, and since I lived a mile from the Unisphere, they slept over at my place. Steve Faust [one of the Tour's founders] at that time was

studying up in Cambridge at Harvard, and he came down for the ride and was the photographer for it.

The name of the thing was the Five Boro Challenge, and we started at the Unisphere at 7:30AM.

Len Diamond: It was a beautiful sunny day; it was warm. It was the old days, so I was probably riding in a T-shirt and cut-off denim shorts.

"We were doing something that had never been done before."



There was a lot of optimism."

HISTORY OF THE TOUR

Steve Bauman: All told I think we had 250 riders.

Eric Prager: I was surprised by how many people came out for the event—surprised and gratified that our cyclists came out of the woodwork, and all of a sudden: bikes all over the place.

Dave Shlichting: The participants were all basically high school students from the bike safety program and AYH club riders. It was a nice, easygoing group.

EDUARDO HERNANDEZ

AYH member; youngest person on the first Tour (9 years old):

I was very young—almost 10 years old—and I did it with my uncle. He found out about it through my mom because we were members of the AYH. My family is lifelong New Yorkers, and we thought, How cool to see our city by bicycle in this way that had never before been possible—riding on the FDR Drive, the Verrazano Bridge.

I had one of those bikes with the banana seats and the tall handlebars. It was really exciting for me as a kid to be surrounded by all these people. It made me feel kind of like a grownup. I didn't realize at the time that I was one of

the youngest people on the ride; I was surrounded by all these youthful people.

Dave Shlichting: We had a police escort, but we didn't have closed roads, so the feel of everything was completely different.

Frank Stoecker: So we started out, and we only had two radio cars—and I realized very early on this is going to be a very very dangerous situation.

Steve Bauman: The ride spread out real fast and the cops were nervous about that.

Len Diamond: I'm not sure they knew exactly how they were gonna handle it.

Frank Stoecker: These guys were riding around on these bicycles and there are red lights to contend with and I thought, geez, we're gonna get these guys killed. So I started bringing in cars from local precincts that we came across, and said, "Hey, take this intersection till these bikes pass, take that intersection," and I just picked up some local radio cars throughout the whole thing. It was a makeshift situation, to be honest with you.

Steve Bauman: We came up on the fly with the idea of dropping a person to block traffic while the ride passed.

Len Diamond: All the leaders from the AYH bike committee would ride up to the front of the ride and each time we came to an intersection, one or two people would

"It was a beautiful sunny day; it was warm. It was the old days, so I was probably riding in a T-shirt and cut-off denim shorts."

—Len Diamond

peel off and they would block the intersection while these 250 people came through. When the rear police car came up to us, we'd get on the back of the ride again and sprint up to the front, so it was kind of like doing intervals all day.

Steve Bauman: These were good riders, so we could keep a procession; we didn't block traffic to any great extent. We were gone inside of one minute, usually within the light cycle.

Len Diamond: The leaders for the bike club were dedicated and they were smart and talented and there were a lot of people who could think on the fly.

ELLEN FARRANT

Namesake of the Ellen Farrant Memorial Bikeway at Jones Beach:

At no time were there any hassles from the motorists. In fact, they were so surprised to see 250 cyclists that they just stared at us in amazement.

Steve Bauman: Everyone was exhilarated. The idea of doing all five boroughs in one day had never

been attempted before, for obvious reasons. It just wasn't something that was done. So it was a novel concept.

Along the way, people were surprised to see so many bikes. A kid saw us in Brooklyn and asked, "Are you gonna do it again next week?"

Len Diamond: People would stop for a second and look at us, and wave. We were a curiosity more than anything else.

Ellen Farrant: The people along the streets were dumbfounded. The kids yelled, "Is this a race?" When people asked who we were, we told them we were cycling the five boroughs. They looked at us in complete disbelief.

We rode through Queens with no problems... past big apartment houses and also neat little homes. We arrived in Brooklyn using all the back roads normally used by trucks or commercial vehicles. However, we finally entered civilization [and] passed churches, housing projects, little homes—no matter where we went, people were staring at us with their mouths opened. I think I have their faces etched in my mind because I had never seen anything like this. In Brooklyn we also passed stores with the wonderful aroma of freshly-baked bagels. We kept asking



for a bagel break, but none of the leaders paid any attention to us.

Getting into Fort Hamilton (Brooklyn), the houses were enormous, but even there the people were coming out on their porches in their nightgowns to look at us.

And then the Verrazano Bridge appeared to our left. What a thrill.

Len Diamond: Riding over the Verrazano Bridge was pretty wild.

Steve Bauman: Everyone felt great, I mean, c'mon—you gotta remember that the VZ was absolute forbidden fruit.

Len Diamond: The scale of it ... is just huge.

Ellen Farrant: The work crew on the bridge put down boards because the expansion joints were dangerous for bicyclists. Each crew stood by and cheered us as we went by.

Len Diamond: You're looking at the thing and you're thinking, Holy cow, I can't believe I'm up here on this thing. It was exciting. And the views from up there are fabulous—of the Harbor, lower Manhattan, and Staten Island.

Ellen Farrant: Arriving in Staten Island I got a different feeling about the area. It was more of a "home town"



“This was the first time that anyone had ever

ridden a bicycle over the Verrazano Bridge.”



“We rode through Queens with no problems... past big apartment houses and also neat little homes. We arrived in Brooklyn using all the back roads normally used by trucks or commercial vehicles.”

-Ellen Farrant

feeling. There were more cobblestone roads there than in any of the other boroughs.

Len Diamond: The ferry from Staten Island to Manhattan was great. It was a beautiful sunny day. We were on the old ferries, the ones that took cars. You could feel the wind and watch Manhattan approaching.

Ellen Farrant: Not having to wait for traffic signals really kept us moving. In Manhattan, we passed South Street Seaport with its four masted schooners in port, the Fulton Fish Market with its unforgettable aromas, Chinatown, some Bowery personalities ... it was the attitude of the people which made the ride a delight to me. If the boroughs were different, the people were the same.

They were hanging out of windows, coming out of stores to line the streets. Some were cheering, some were staring. The kids were dancing up and down and running alongside us. Those who had bikes rode with us for a while.

Len Diamond: It was a long day. The first tour was a lot more miles than we do now. The rest stop was Nathan's Famous. They were the sponsor of the tour that year, and all the leaders got T-shirts that said Nathan's on the front and Five Boro Marshal on the back. I still have it somewhere in the closet, an orange T-shirt that's 40 years old now.

JULIETTE FAUST KENNEDY

Daughter of Steve Faust

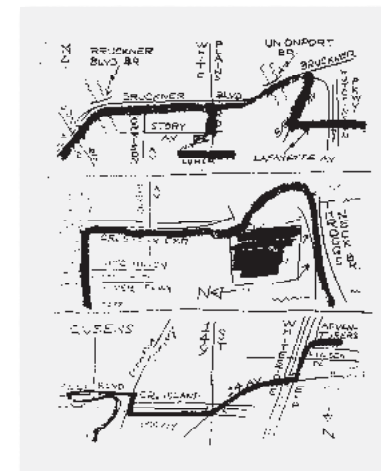
My dad wore Five Boro Bike Tour T-shirts everywhere but work, at all times. Always. He would put a smarter shirt over it, but it was just what he wore. He had so many of them. There's a picture from my graduate school graduation and he's wearing a Bike New York T-shirt.

Dave Shlichting: I remember riding from the Bronx into Queens over the Throgs Neck. It was a rough road;

windy, and noisy, with traffic all over the place honking at you.

Len Diamond: The police and the Bridge and Tunnel Authority didn't close the bridge off to traffic. It's a three-lane roadway and all they did was put cones down the middle lane, and they had us in the right-hand lane and cars in the left-hand lane.

Ellen Farrant: As the police proceeded through the opening with bicyclists



HISTORY OF THE TOUR

lined up on both sides of them, we all just spontaneously started to cheer and applaud them. The police were sort of embarrassed but loved every minute of it. They grinned from ear to ear and put up the V sign for Victory.

Len Diamond: It was an adventure. We were doing something that had never been done before. There was a lot of optimism. There was a feeling that bicycling was going to go places in New York City.

Eric Prager: Seeing so many cyclists converge on one point for the same purpose was really amazing and gratifying.

Len Diamond: The day went so well that everyone was thinking, I can't wait to see what we do next year. How much bigger can we make it? What can we do? There was a feeling of, This is great, we gotta see what we can do with this.

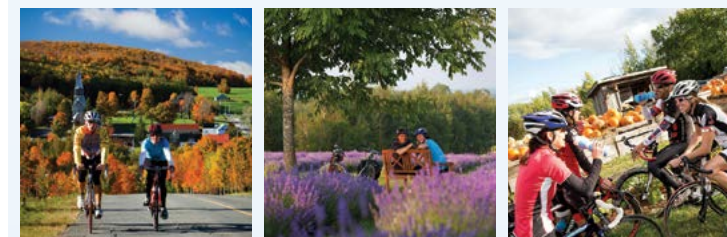
“The Tour is an event that makes a lot of people really happy, and makes bicycling really visible in New York City, and brings people from around the world to ride bikes on these streets—it's amazing in that respect. But it's also incredibly successful in fundraising and letting Bike New York run these great free classes throughout the year. So it's a win-win.”

—Len Diamond



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