Biking culture is big in Tucson. Wherever you go, there is likely to be someone pedaling close by, fighting for a slice of the road. But even for the most ardent biking enthusiast, it’s difficult to imagine spending four months in the saddle!

Justin Mauser decided to do just that. From August to November, he took his biking experience to the next level by riding solo across the country.

A recent graduate from the University of Arizona, with a degree in biochemistry, Mauser has hopes of attending medical school but decided that his classroom experience is not enough. He chose to take what is known as a “gap year,” and he’s not the only one. The practice has become so popular it has recently spawned “gap fairs,” which are much like career fairs, but students can go see what volunteer opportunities are available rather than how they can enter the workforce.

Although the word “gap” suggests an empty space between one thing and the next, Mauser’s gap-year goal is quite the opposite. He is filling his year, as so many new grads have decided to do, with life experience and personal growth, becoming more of an embodiment of what columnist/author David Brooks coined as the “odyssean years”—“the decade of wandering between adolescence and adulthood.”

Thanks to the 2010 health-care reform law, 20-somethings are eligible to receive benefits from their parents’ health insurance until they are 26. This freedom from scrambling for a job with reasonable benefits allows recent grads time to discover themselves and how they might fit into the world around them, while helping others along the way.

Taking his education out on the road has been Mauser’s solution to the problem many students face: making the transition from college life to “What do I do now?” Mauser has decided to give back. He is biking across the country from Bar Harbor, Maine, to Tucson, raising money to benefit the Make-a-Wish Foundation, which helps to make the dreams of seriously ill children come true.

Mauser’s inspiration for working with Make-a-Wish began while in school, volunteering at the University of Arizona. “I really learned what an impact the program has on the lives of the ‘Wish kids,’” he says.

The Make-a-Wish Foundation is the largest wish-granting organization in the world. It originated in Arizona, when the first Wish kid, a seven-year-old boy named Chris, wanted to become a police officer for a day. By the end of the year, 150 kids in 36 states were granted their wishes through the foundation.

Justin about to bike Mt. Lemmon, a common practice while training for his cross-country ride.
November 2011, Make-a-Wish Foundation of Arizona will have granted 4,000 wishes. The Make-a-Wish Foundation of America’s 64 chapters boast granting more than 340,000 wishes, nationwide.

“Justin came to us with the idea,” says Kim Miller, the events manager for the Make-a-Wish Foundation of Arizona. “He is so genuine about his wanting to help and is very impassioned about his mission.”

Mauer’s fundraising began with a number of events hosted to raise awareness about the ride, and led to the sale of T-shirts. From those profits, Mauer kept 30 percent for food and other necessities, and Make-a-Wish was given 70 percent. The T-shirts aptly had the words “Carpe-Diem” emblazoned on them. Mauer sent out a challenge to those who follow him on his blog to wear the shirts and send in a picture of themselves as they were “seizing the day.”

Mauer was constant in his resolve and wouldn’t be deterred from his goal, even when offered money from a nervous, well-intentioned grandmother as a bribe to stay home. For safety, Mauer was armed with a hunting knife and a can of mace; the mace he’s only had to threaten to use once—against a skunk raiding his campsite. Little cycling tricks have helped to keep him comfortable, such as stuffing grocery bags in his jacket for insulation. “I definitely underestimated just how uncomfortable camping would be,” he admits.

Mauer is not the first to bike across the country; there are gap-year programs available that will follow a group of bikers, supplying meals and a warm place to sleep at the end of the day. But Mauer decided going solo would be more of an adventure and, in the end, more rewarding.

Within these gap years, students learn that they are responsible for their learning and their own personal growth, a proactive approach to life that can’t always be taught in a classroom.

A trip like this is a big undertaking, but Mauer is leaving a lot of it up to the moment. Meeting people along the way has been part of the fun. “At the end of a day, I’ll go to a bar and relax,” he recalls. Mauer did learn in school that “beer is good. It’s full of carbohydrates to refuel and is just great for relaxing. Plus you meet a lot of people when you’re in spandex.”

Mauer is expected to arrive home in early November. To learn more about his adventure and donate to Make-a-Wish, read his blog “Wish Across the Country” at: http://wishfromcoasttocoast.blogspot.com.

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