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Communications intern Reina Slutske masters the two-wheeler at the Long Beach Convention Center.



How Reina Found Her Courage, Learned to Ride a Bike and Got Kissed

- A *Bike to Work Week* story of one young woman's quest for acceptance and mobility

By REINA V. SLUTSKE

(May 16, 2006) In the late 1800s, bicycles were revolutionary. They created independence, especially for women, and offered an option other than the horse and buggy to get where you needed to go.

Fast forward to a time when our bikes collect dust in favor of our cars and \$3 per gallon gasoline. As Los Angeles County's Bike to Work Week approached, I confided in my co-interns and boss, Bill Heard, that I didn't know how to ride a bike, and neither did my boyfriend, Ari Kutner.

Bill promptly gave me an assignment: learn to ride a bicycle and write a story about it for Bike to Work Week.

I was in a state of shock. Me on a bike? My stomach tied itself into a knot. The last time I was on a bike was when I was seven years old, growing up in San Jose. I tried to ride one and fell on my neighbor's lawn. After that day, I swore I would never ride again.

But early Sunday morning, sure enough, Ari and I took the Metro Blue Line down to the Transit Mall in Long Beach. We proceeded to Bikestation Long Beach, a non-profit organization that promotes bike commuting, including Bike to Work Week. Although it is used mainly for bike parking, it also has other services, which include renting bikes for day use.



Unsure of what's to come, Employee Communications Intern Reina Slutske summons her courage before mounting her rented bike.

Instructions in French?

We rented two bikes, identical green with fat tires. The attendant explained the bike's seven speeds, the brakes, seat adjustments, and how "forgiving" the bikes were. He might as well have spoken in French, because most of what he was saying didn't make any sense to me, the inexperienced bike rider.

We took our bikes out to the front of the Long Beach Convention Center, which has a wide path perfect for learning to ride. Within ten minutes of getting his footing, Ari was off and racing, happy as could be. He would ride around, and come back with a huge grin on his face.

As for me... well, every time I tried to get both feet on the pedals, I would completely recoil, or not even reach them. I was so terrified that I was making sure to keep one foot on the ground at all times.

Being the supportive boyfriend that he is, Ari stood by me and tried to coach me. But my body did not want the ground beneath me to leave abruptly.

I remembered rolling around the neighborhood on my scooter and watching other kids speed past me on their bikes. I thought of my sister biking off to the market to run errands, leaving me behind.

A godforsaken bicycle



Trying desperately to master her uncooperative

And now here I was in the present, where my head ached from the glare and my butt hurt from sitting wrong on this godforsaken bicycle.

bike, Reina is unwilling to take her feet off the ground.

I pouted and felt like crying. How could I learn now to ride a bike? I was too afraid—afraid of falling, afraid of failing, afraid of being left behind. I just wanted to give in.

"You're psyching yourself out," Ari said. "You're almost there. I know you can do it. You can't be afraid. You have to be persistent."

I decided to sit as Ari pedaled off for a little bit. I thought of many things, and then, for some odd reason, my mind went to my grandmother. She had died a little over a week earlier. If there was one thing to be said for her, she was a fighter. Quitting just wasn't in my blood.

I got up on the bike, and adjusted the pedals. I pushed a little forward, and let my other foot finally leave the ground and find its way onto the pedal. It was about faith, mainly faith in myself.



Success! Reina pedals happily alongside the Long Beach Convention Center.

Wind in her hair

Three seconds on the bike turned to four, and four turned to ten. Little by little, I kept moving, as if someone was walking alongside me, pushing me forward. I felt the wind through my hair and across my skin as I pedaled, watching Ari in front of me, and calling out to him, "Wait!"

He turned around and smiled as I caught up, starting to whiz by on the bicycle. When I stopped, he laughed and kissed me, with a great big smile on his face; proud that I didn't give up, no matter how much I wanted to.

As we raced up and down the convention center path, with the ocean in the distance setting a perfect scene, I was amazed with myself. Even though I couldn't steer and kept somehow driving myself into walls and planters, the fact that I was even riding was a miracle. Sitting at lunch that day, I never felt happier and more alive.

I live too far away to be able to commute by bike for Bike to Work Week, no matter how much I want to. Aside from its amazing health benefits, for both our bodies and the environment, the fact is that the world passes by us way too fast in our cars.

We're so focused on getting where we need to go without killing anyone that we forget how beautiful Southern California really is and forget to enjoy it. There is something peaceful and wonderful about a bike.

Meanwhile, boyfriend Ari Kutner stands proudly next to his bike.



When I got on the Metro to return home from Long Beach that night, I took notice of the numerous bikes that were around me, and felt incredibly proud. Persistence, after all, was what it was all about. And I couldn't wait for my next bike ride with Ari.

Editor's Note: Reina Slutske is a Communications Department intern who reports for myMetro.net. She graduated with a degree in journalism from Cal State University Fullerton.