

vides sustenance—when you ride with Bike-Aid, McCue notes, “you never know where your next meal is coming from.” And it gives bikers a chance to converse with nonbikers, an important function given that these people ride together, eat together, and sleep (you know what I mean) together. Hackett says—half-jokingly, I think—“We talk to people next to us because we’re sick of the group.”

Surviving within this “community on wheels” (a slightly smarmy term that enjoys a vogue in Bike-Aid Land) is part of the educational process. “You have to learn how to interact with others,” Swartz says, “how to tolerate actions that you’d usually walk away from, because there’s no escaping.”

The day after the Coffee Cup luncheon, the group gathers on a farm outside St. Charles, Minnesota. The owner has muscular dystrophy and was recently confined to a wheelchair; the bikers have volunteered to paint his house so he can sell it and move into town.

Scaffolds frame the house, and group members are scattered at every elevation. Their yellow Bike-Aid tank tops are splattered with paint. Those shirts that remain clean receive a few fresh dribbles, courtesy of Miquelon. A TV crew from nearby Rochester is capturing the event for posterity, or at least the evening news.

Stopping briefly for a Coke, McCue chats with Francis Passe, the director of the Southeast Minnesota Rural Education and Resource Center (the group hosting Bike-Aid in St. Charles). “Your visit is a super lift to us,” she says. “It’s been quite a week. Not only this house painting, but we’ve been trying to get funding to stay in business, and I spent most of the week in court helping a farmer in danger of losing his farm.”

McCue mentions that he will be entering law school soon. “Oh my gosh,” Passe says. “Give me your phone number before you leave; I’ll be calling you in three years for some free legal advice.”

Later, while McCue slaps white paint on a weathered cellar door, he describes his motives for joining Bike-Aid. “I’m not here for a cross-country vacation,” he says, wiping a stray drop of paint from his forehead. “I’m here to continue my education, see America, and meet people who think differently from me. To learn what this country’s all about, learn what the problems are, and how America’s next generation will fit in.”

After graduating from Marquette University in 1988, McCue worked at a day center for the homeless in California. He plans to spend another year working at a shelter in Boston before entering law school—and eventually, perhaps, the political arena. “Hopefully,” he says, “I’ll be in a position of leadership someday, where I can use these experi-

ences to effect change.”

When the house is painted, the group returns by car to St. Charles, where their bikes are stored. They change from paint-spattered clothes to biking togs, fill their water bottles, and say goodbye to their hosts. It’s nearly four in the afternoon; they’ve got 40 miles to ride before nightfall. As they head off, an older gentleman—a farmer who joined them in painting the house—calls after them: “Make changes in society!”

“Don’t worry,” McCue shouts back. “We will. At least we’ll try.”

From Minnesota, they continue east. As they reach a more urban part of the country, the stretches of nothingness become shorter and the cafe stops more frequent. But there is still plenty of work to be done. In Chicago, they paint a porch for a low-income housing group, and in Cincinnati, they help prepare some dilapidated apartments for renovation.

On the last week of their odyssey, they spend a night with some Hutterite farmers in Pennsylvania. The Hutterites, a religious sect somewhat similar to the Mennonites and Amish, live communally, and the bikers spend the

night with families in dormitories. During the day, Swartz and the other women work in the kitchen and in a community toy factory. The men help shingle the roof for the new mess hall. “I was really dying up there,” McCue says, pointing to the blisters on his hands.

Over dinner and breakfast, the two groups talk about religion, world politics, farming, and philosophy. At one point, Swartz asks, “Who owns the land?” The answer: “It’s God’s property.”

The Hutterites’ selflessness impresses Swartz, who graduated a few weeks before the trip and is unsure about her future plans. It gets her thinking. “The people here are living proof that you can set aside your own personal drive and ambition for the good of the community,” she says. “It really helps catalyze a lot of my thoughts about how much we need and how much we can give. Here we



In Minnesota, David Haghdan, a University of California at Davis student, and others help prepare strawberries for a county fair’s 50-foot-long sundae.

The payoff: After 63 days and 3,600 miles, the bikers finally finish their crusade in Washington, D.C. After their victory lap, the riders lose their bikes aside and start celebrating.

