A year ago, Stephen Barton graduated from SU and set off on a cross-country bicycle trip—only to have his life nearly taken away in the Aurora, Colorado, theater shootings. Today, he is dedicated to changing the country’s attitude about gun violence.

BY STEPHEN BARTON
LAST MAY, I STOOD IN FRONT OF thousands of my fellow graduates and their loved ones in the Carrier Dome to deliver a Commencement address. That moment was the culmination of my undergraduate career at Syracuse, a four-year odyssey that took me from the crumbling houses of the Near West Side in Syracuse to the dazzling Midtown high-rises of New York City. Flanked by distinguished academics and professionals, I stood at the podium and tried to impart what little wisdom I had acquired during my 22 years of existence—without fainting. I implored my peers to remember that “the only limits we face are the ones we create for ourselves.”

Less than a month later, I was dipping the rear wheel of my bicycle in the Atlantic Ocean, about to embark on a cross-country trip that would test my own advice. My best friend, Ethan, and I were about to pedal nearly 4,500 miles in less than 80 days with more than 30 pounds of camping supplies and other equipment on our backs and bikes. We barely trained at all in the weeks leading up to the trip, and our understanding of bicycle maintenance was rudimentary, at best.

The journey actually began three years earlier, when I received an unexpected e-mail from Ethan while I was studying abroad in Madrid. Ethan was hard at work in his second year at Yale after a summer spent studying Mandarin in Taiwan, while I was still adjusting to the language barrier and the copious pitchers of sangria. Ethan’s e-mail was brief, but it contained a proposition of almost unlimited potential: “What do you think about going on a cross-country bicycle trip after graduation?” I quickly wrote back in enthusiastic support of the idea, seizing upon the glorious image of two old friends riding off into the sunset before parting ways to pursue their respective ambitions.

In our 15 years of friendship, this wasn’t the first time we had conspired to do something crazy. (Just ask our high school teachers.) But the cross-country
trip was far more serious than any of our previous schemes. It was inspired partly by John Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley*, in which the aging author drives from coast to coast with his French poodle “in search of America.” Ethan and I shared Steinbeck’s urge to travel our beloved country, especially after having been confronted during our visits abroad by the reality that we don’t actually know it that well. We resolved to travel slowly and purposefully through Middle America’s patchwork quilt of towns, farms, and villages. Our route was a winding one, starting in Virginia, then heading to Kentucky and Tennessee before curving into the Deep South and Texas, followed by a trek across the Great Plains and Colorado to reach the West. We would trace the territorial growth of our country as settled by our pioneering ancestors so many years ago, but with bicycle and tent instead of Conestoga wagon.

When we first began to tell friends and family about our plan to bicycle across the country, they warned us about reckless drivers, murderous thieves, and the various other brigands and vagabonds that occupy the back roads of America. They said our lack of training could prove deadly in the heat of summer. Didn’t we know how tall the Rocky Mountains are? Why not take a car instead? Ethan and I remained undeterred—partly because we’re young and stupid, but also because we knew deviating from our carefully considered plan would betray its original inspiration. And so we dipped our rear wheels in the Atlantic Ocean at Virginia Beach, Virginia, on June 6, 2012.

Forty-three days and 2,750 miles later, we arrived in Aurora, Colorado, where we bought tickets to the midnight premiere of the summer blockbuster we had been talking about all trip long: *The Dark Knight Rises*. Yes, that movie. On that night. In that Aurora. At that theater.

I was hit in the head and torso by a shotgun blast before I had fully realized what was happening. I fell forward into the aisle and listened to the steady report of a semi-automatic rifle as warm blood rushed out of my neck and through my fingers. I remember hearing Ethan, who was not wounded, yelling at a 911 dispatcher through his cell phone. Our host for the night, who sat between us and whose ticket we bought out of gratitude for her hospitality, had been shot in the head.

A winding, unpredictable cross-country trip had led us to one of the worst mass shootings in America’s history, as if our lives had been leading up to it ever since Ethan’s e-mail arrived in my inbox in Spain. I thought I was going to die, but I didn’t feel ready at all. I was 22 years old. I had just graduated from Syracuse with three degrees at the top of my class. I had a Fulbright grant to teach English in Russia. I had an offer to join the Teach For America corps in North Carolina. If nothing else, I had a cross-country trip to finish.
The gunman’s 100-round rifle magazine suddenly jammed, snapping me out of my fears and allowing me time to escape out the back emergency exit. I ran to the parking lot, where I found a police officer tending to someone who had been shot in the leg. As the officer drove us in the back of his police car to a triage area, the other shooting victim leaned over and asked me if I was religious. I told him I wasn’t, but he said he would pray for me anyway. Maybe somebody heard those prayers, because I was in the operating room less than 30 minutes later. Ethan escaped without physical injury, and our host survived without serious damage to her brain. I woke up two doors down from her in the intensive care unit of the hospital a few hours after surgery, filled with more than 20 pieces of lead and a renewed sense of vitality.

But my mind didn’t linger long on the circumstances of my own survival, and I began to wonder how many hadn’t been as lucky to escape the chaos of the theater. I immediately turned on the television, joining the rest of the country in seeking answers. At first, I sought the basic details of the shooting—the number of casualties, the types of weapons used in the assault, the timeline of events—but those questions were answered easily enough. More difficult were the questions that followed— who, why, and how? I began to place my brush with death in greater context by reading about the staggering amount of gun violence in America. What was once a totally peripheral issue to me had suddenly become the focus of my waking hours. I was shocked to learn that approximately 12,000 Americans are murdered with guns every year and more than 18,000 commit suicide by firearm, to say nothing of the uncounted sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, friends, neighbors, and wounded survivors left behind.

Gun violence isn’t just an urban issue, as I once believed. Nor is it a gang or minority issue. It’s an American issue that affects us all, yet any discussion of the matter was notably absent from the campaign trail. By and large, elected leaders ignored the issue, and the public discourse came nowhere close to my personal outrage. But I soon realized I couldn’t rightfully get upset over inaction if I wasn’t personally involved in trying to bring about change. As I was deciding to defer my Fulbright scholarship to focus on my physical recovery, I reached out to the staff of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who co-founded Mayors Against Illegal Guns, the leading national advocacy group for gun violence prevention.
What was a random act of senseless violence had suddenly empowered me. Mayors Against Illegal Guns hired me in September to help with research, communications, and outreach to others affected by gun violence. My job has since taken me many places, including New York City Hall, the White House, Congress, and various state capitols. I have met hundreds of survivors and family members of victims of gun violence from all walks of life, and we have worked together to transform our tragedy into advocacy.

But I never expected my job to bring me back home to Connecticut. I learned of the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary, which is located 10 miles from where I grew up, while visiting my Aurora host during a work trip in Colorado. I would later discover a personal connection to one of the murdered teachers, as well as a teacher who survived.

I flew back home the following day, where I was welcomed by candle-lit luminaries on the lawn in front of my church flickering in a message of “HOPE.” Not long afterward, I was standing in front of the makeshift memorial in Sandy Hook, trying to make sense of the unimaginable violence that seemed to be following me.

I still haven’t made sense of it, much less what happened that night in Aurora. I don’t understand why Ethan and I chose that theater. I can’t comprehend what convinces someone to carefully plan and execute a mass shooting. I don’t know why my friends and I lived, while 12 others didn’t. The victims in that theater weren’t any more ready to die that night than I was. They were supposed to wake up in bed the next morning, slightly groggy from a late night at a midnight movie premiere.

Since the moment shotgun pellets first pierced my skin, I’ve realized just how arrogant I was to tell my fellow graduates so many months ago that the challenges of living are merely self-imposed. Rather, our lives tend to be filled with obstacles and limits over which we have little or no control. A relaxing weekend in the Denver metro area can suddenly turn into an unexpected stay in the intensive care unit, with only some scars and damaged nerves to show for it. And I was lucky.
I've since realized that our lives are ultimately defined by how we react to our setbacks and difficulties. We may not be able to change the past, but we can affect the future. In that spirit, the chorus of voices calling out for change has grown ever more numerous since the shooting in Sandy Hook. The White House has committed itself to reform, as have many members of Congress from both sides of the aisle. There is a growing consensus that this time will be different—that the victims will not have died in vain; that the families and survivors will finally receive closure; that our country will no longer be scarred by senseless violence. Because that’s the America I hope to find when I climb back on my bicycle this summer to finish the last leg of the trip with Ethan.

Self-created obstacles and limits be damned. «

A member of the Class of 2012, Stephen Barton was a University Scholar and Class Marshal who graduated summa cum laude with bachelor’s degrees in economics, international relations, and Russian language, literature, and culture. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.