



LARRY RUBINSTEIN and the Bicycle Coalition of Maine

BY DONNA HALVORSEN



Growing up in New York City, Larry Rubinstein discovered the joy of biking.

He and his brother whizzed around their Bronx neighborhood on their new English racing bikes, the three-speed, thin-framed bikes that were in vogue at the time.

But it was a doctor's warning decades later that made him the passionate biker he is today. "I got to be 50, and my doctor said, 'You can't run anymore. You're ruining your legs. If you want exercise, you can either bike or swim.'"

Rubinstein chose biking, and it proved to be a good choice. When he had prostate cancer surgery two years ago, his doctor said he was in such good shape that he didn't need physical therapy afterward. He was back on his bike in two weeks. Biking was all the therapy he needed.

Now the ordained rabbi, a youthful 72, heads the Bicycle Coalition of Maine, a quietly persuasive force of 7,000 bikers whose efforts have helped make Maine the second-most bicycle-friendly state in the nation, behind only Washington.



“Maine is a wonderful place to bike,” says Rubinstein, who lives in Scarborough with his wife Robin. “There’s not a lot of traffic, especially after you’ve lived in Philadelphia, Boston and New York. People are extremely friendly. They don’t try to push you off the road.”

“The best thing is that it’s gorgeous,” he adds. “There’s no part of Maine that isn’t beautiful. And biking is a great way to see things. You see more on a bike than you do in a car.”

The Bicycle Coalition, 20 years old this year, is “one of the strongest bike organizations in the country,” says Jeff Miller, the group’s executive director for nearly 12 years.

Miller, who now heads the national Alliance for

Biking and Walking in Washington, D.C., says the Maine group has been a model for other states, where biking advocates look at Maine’s small population and its level of biking activity and say, “If Maine can do that, we can, too.”

The coalition works for bike-friendly laws, teaches bicycle safety, trains advocates to work in their communities, educates drivers on sharing the road, works with employers to promote bicycle commuting, coordinates the Safe Routes to School program, organizes bike swaps and sponsors popular rides, such as the Women’s Ride and the Maine Lobster Ride & Roll.

The group works closely with the Maine Department of Transportation. “We have the 3-foot rule—cars have



Left: A cyclist pedaling near the Rockport bridge.
This Page: Larry Rubinstein towing his grandson, Zev.

to give bikes at least 3 feet of clearance while passing, and kids under 16 have to wear helmets,” Rubinstein says. “We’re trying to improve traffic patterns. We reach thousands of children through school education programs. We sponsor major rides.”

As a result of such activities, Maine has been moving up in “bicycle-friendliness.” Its second-place ranking by the League of American Bicyclists last year is up from sixth in 2008 and third in 2009 and 2010.

Maine has a built-in advantage in attracting bicyclists because of its proximity to East Coast population centers that have sent generations of visitors to experience the glories of a Maine summer. Bicycle touring is already an important part of the state’s tourism market, “a clean industry benefitting Maine’s

economy,” the state says in promoting it. Tourism officials want to attract even more visitors—and move them around the state using something other than the automobile.

Because so many adults biked as children, it’s not difficult to sell bicycling, which is “very low impact and easy on the joints,” Miller says. “It’s one of the ways all of us can connect with being a kid again.

Maine, with its winding roads and spectacular scenery, has enhanced the experience by adding bike lanes to roadways and building bike paths while also promoting biking as part of the state’s transportation system.

Miller was at a fundraising event about seven years ago when Rubinstein introduced himself and said he wanted to work with the coalition. When Rubinstein

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said he was heavily involved in a \$4 billion capital campaign for his alma mater, Columbia University, Miller was impressed.

Rubinstein took a seat on the coalition board and is now its president.

"He has been a true gem of a board member," Miller says. "He's a very kind, wise and I would even say jovial soul."

Rubinstein was one of those summer people who have swollen Maine's summer population each year for a century or more. In 1960 his parents bought a cabin on Lake Cobbossee, near Augusta, and family members gathered there each summer. The Rubinsteins moved to Maine in 2003, in part because of their summer experiences, but they also wanted to live in a place with culture, and they found that in Portland.

Rubinstein was ordained a rabbi in 1965. After serving in Omaha and Philadelphia for 13 years, he left the pulpit and became a fundraiser extraordinaire for such organizations as the Jewish Federation of Philadelphia, the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and Brandeis University in Boston, where he ran the school's first capital campaign, raising \$200 million.

"I like to be active," he explains. "I don't want to sit around."

He hasn't done much sitting around in Maine, either. He's leading a \$4 million campaign to restore the world-class, 100-year-old Kotzschmar Organ in Portland's Merrill Auditorium. He's also vice president of Portland Museum of Art's board of trustees, and he serves on the board of the Bowdoin International Music Festival.

Rubinstein's brothers come to Maine from New York

each summer to ride with him, but his best biking buddies are his grandsons, Noah, 12, Zev, 6 and Jesse, 4, who live in Massachusetts. While he likes having buddies, he doesn't always need one. "I've become addicted to biking," he says. "I find it to be a wonderful release. I just go out on my own and have a good time."

Nancy Grant, the coalition's executive director, looks ahead to the group's next 20 years and sees Mainers "reclaiming the streets" as they bike to work, school and events. She sees thousands of visitors descending on the state because of its culture of great biking. She sees town centers and businesses organized around bicyclists and pedestrians instead of parked cars.

A pipe dream? Not to Grant, who sees bicycle's influence extending far beyond recreation.

"Biking is part of the solution for many of our nation's problems, including health, energy, transportation and the environment," she says. "If we can make it easy for people to jump on their bikes and safely get from one place to another, they will gladly bike more to be part of the solution." ■



Zev and Jesse together with Grandpa Larry.

Donna Halvorsen, who lives in South Portland, has been a reporter for more than 30 years in Maine, Minnesota and New York. She covered courts for the Portland Press Herald in the 1980s and retired in 2007 from the Minneapolis Star Tribune, where she spent 17 years covering legal and consumer issues, health care and the Minnesota Legislature.