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**NEWS RELEASE**

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**UW-Stout graduate bikes 2,700 miles coast to coast in search of ‘one more big adventure’**

*Zachary Helget pedaled from San Diego to Jacksonville before starting his career as a data analyst*

[Story Link](https://www.uwstout.edu/about-us/news-center/uw-stout-graduate-bikes-2700-miles-coast-coast-search-one-more-big-adventure)

**Photos attached**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
July 5, 2023

Menomonie, Wis. – During his 2,700-mile, 39-day, eight-state bike ride across the southern United States, **Zachary Helget** had time to think. Mile after mile, listening to the sound of his tires whirring on pavement – tires he would have to repair several times during his trek – Helget began to ponder the ship of Theseus, a philosophy of identity about whether an object which has had all its original parts replaced remains the same object.

“Things have changed and evolved on the bike. But it is the same bike,” Helget wrote in his [travel blog Across America](https://acrossamerica1.blogspot.com/?m=1). “I think of myself. I have changed and evolved on the trip, but I'm still me. But I have changed a lot of ways through this trip. So, am I really the same person?”

Helget, of New Ulm, Minn., graduated from University of Wisconsin-Stout on May 6, with his degree in [business administration](https://www.uwstout.edu/programs/bs-business-administration) and minors in economics; and investments and finance. On May 12, he flew to San Diego to begin his transformational tour.

Averaging 70 miles a day, he charted several days with more than 100 miles. He battled headwinds, elevation climbs, the aggravation of broken spokes and crooked tires, heavy traffic, poorly maintained roads and self-doubt. He ate a lot of food to keep his energy up, with Pop-Tarts as his go-to snack, eating about 12 of the cheap, calorie-dense pastries per day.

Helget spent his nights tenting in public parks, state parks and outside a solar-panel field; booked hotel rooms; visited with family; and stayed with [Warm Showers](https://www.warmshowers.org/) community hosts, a free worldwide hospitality exchange for touring cyclists. He found comfort in conversations with strangers and came to rely on the kindness of new friends.

Helget arrived at the Atlantic coast in Jacksonville, Fla., on June 20.

**Finding that next mountain**

Helget wanted one more big adventure before moving to Stevens Point at the end of June to start his career as a data analyst at Sentry Insurance.

“There’s more to life than going straight to work after university,” he said. “Everyone I talked to on my trip thought it was cool that I was doing this adventure. Many of them wished they took more time off and traveled. It is vital to go on the adventure you have always dreamed of. Because once you start working, getting that month-plus off is near impossible. Get out there.”

Helget had only taken one overnight bike trip before but had completed many 100-mile rides and a 200-mile ride last summer. He was a sprinter on UW-Stout’s track team for three years but left track his senior year to focus on cycling.

Setting out on his journey, Helget recalled week one as being much more challenging than he expected. He had ridden in hot weather before but had not considered that his body would need to climatize to the Arizona desert after a breezy spring in Wisconsin.

“There were days in western Arizona when it would be over 95 degrees by 9 a.m. That meant waking up at 3:30 to 4:30 a.m., and riding in the dark for one to two hours and getting off the road prior to 10 a.m.,” he said.

“Day one caught me so off guard and hit me so hard, that was I scared, scared of failure. Day one broke me,” he wrote in his blog, noting the 7,731-foot elevation change. “It took a few rides that first week to rebuild the confidence within myself. Once I rebuilt that confidence again, I was back to my old self, laser-focused on the goal at hand. To rebuild that confidence, I leaned on my support, family, friends and mentors. They helped convince me I could complete this when I didn't know if I could.

“Little by little it got better and better. At some point, it started to become fun, and I remembered why I wanted to do this in the first place.”

His favorite segments of the ride were breathtaking moments south of Tucson, Ariz., and along the Gulf Coast in Mississippi, Alabama and Florida.

“South of Tucson, you gain 2,000 feet in elevation, so it cools down. You leave the desert, and there is wildlife again. There are creeks and rivers. For lack of a better phrase, there is life. The desert is very desolate and not much can survive. South of Tucson is a very sharp contrast to the desert. It is a place where there is a meshing of many habitats. The Gulf Coast speaks for itself. Beautiful water and sand. Very scenic,” Helget said.

On day 11, some 700 miles into his trek, Helget crossed the Continental Divide between Portal, Ariz., and Columbus, N.M.

Day 13 brought a couple of unexpected surprises when he discovered he had biked 30 miles in the wrong direction, and later met his first fellow bike tourist, Steve from Washington, who was touring in the opposite direction as Helget, from Florida to San Diego.

“Really good man. Gave a lot of advice and helped build my confidence. I asked him a ton of questions on the rides ahead. And we exchanged stories from the rides behind,” Helget wrote. “It's not every day that you meet a person where I have done all the riding they're about to do, and they've done all the riding I'm about to do. It's weird, a very good kind of weird though.”

Day 22 was a day of rest, one of five total on the trek. He toured San Antonio with an aunt, celebrating the halfway mark of his journey and noted a motto of the Alamo, “Victory or death.”

On day 25, a moment of curiosity struck. He biked 10 miles off his planned route to stop in New Ulm, Texas, in homage to his hometown in Minnesota, some 1,150 miles to the north.

His longest day was day 32, when he biked 179 miles from New Orleans to Foley, Ala. He stayed the night at an aunt’s house.

“It’s good to be with family. It made the riding a lot easier today,” he wrote.

When Helget hit the Atlantic Ocean 39 days into his ride, he thought back to week one.

“I thought I was going to break down and cry when I hit the Atlantic Ocean,” he wrote. “But no, that didn't happen. There wasn't a whole lot of emotion going on. It was cool, but kind of just another ride. That's just who I am, always looking for the next mountain to climb.”

**Building confidence and taking a chance**

Helget served as a resident adviser with UW-Stout [Housing](https://www.uwstout.edu/life-stout/housing) and worked with fellow RA Ben LeMay to bring the Cycling Club back to UW-Stout. As vice president, Helget organized factory tours to two bike companies, gaining insight into how his bike and its parts moved through the supply chain.

“Being an RA helped me a ton for this trip and for my life in general,” he added. “As an RA, I met and welcomed new residents to the floor and befriended people who were very different than me. Not being scared to talk to strangers was a necessity for this bike adventure.”

In spring 2022, Helget took online classes and flew to Europe with friend and fellow RA David Tesar. They traveled together for a bit, and then Helget toured through Italy and Croatia, building confidence in his solo travel.

“When I was planning the bike tour, I didn’t give it a second thought. I wanted to go solo and do this trip myself,” he said. “My travel abroad also helped with my planning ability. I love planning things out. I think it is very funny when you plan things out and quickly that plan gets thrown out the window for a different one. This happened often on the bike trip.”

In his [blog epilogue](https://acrossamerica1.blogspot.com/?m=1), Helget wrote, “People made this trip what it was. From awesome hosts to strangers I met along the way, they made it worth doing. I never would have guessed it going into it. It was hardly about cycling at all. Cycling was just the mode of transport for this adventure.

“I am not one to go out of my way to motivate people to do stuff. But all I can say in general, about life in general, is don't be scared. People are good. Take a chance. See what happens. You never know, you may stumble on an adventure of a lifetime.”

*UW-Stout is*[*Wisconsin’s Polytechnic University*](https://www.uwstout.edu/about-us/our-polytechnic-advantage)*, with a focus on applied learning, collaboration with business and industry, and career outcomes. Learn more via the*[*FOCUS2030*](https://www.uwstout.edu/focus-2030-plan-initiatives)*strategic plan.*

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**Photos**

UW-Stout graduate Zachary Helget biked from San Diego to the Atlantic coast in Jacksonville, Fla., on a 2,700-mile adventure. Photo contributed by Zachary Helget.

Helget biked through sweeping landscapes, some of his favorite near Portal, Ariz., south of Tucson. Photo contributed by Zachary Helget.

Helget, of New Ulm, Minn., passed through New Ulm, Texas, on his bike tour. Photo contributed by Zachary Helget.

A beach on the Gulf Coast between Foley, Ala., and Pensacola, Fla. Photo contributed by Zachary Helget.

Helget in Foley, Ala. Photo contributed by Zachary Helget.