

A Success Story

Re-invention Through Cycling

By Lisa K. Harris

When Mario Gonzalez started cycling, he rode at night, peddling along The Loop on his clunker with thick tires. Topping 435 pounds, Gonzalez, an El Rio Community Health Center courier, didn't want to hear anyone snicker about his weight, so he rode when nobody would see him. He rode the fat-tired bulky bike because a fast road bike with skinny tires wouldn't support him.

But that was then. In 2013's El Tour de Tucson, Gonzalez rode with the pack, finishing the 81-mile distance on a sleek Litespeed C3 with an all carbon fiber frame.

Gonzalez, 28, bought his first bike - that night-riding clunker - 1 1/2 years ago, at the GABA bike swap, and thought he'd try cycling to lose weight.

"I suffered from sleep apnea and worried that it was the beginning of more health problems," he said. "That next, I'd have diabetes, heart issues, even die."

He tried running and playing basketball, but "they made my knees hurt. And the gym didn't work for me," Gonzalez said.

So he turned to cycling. From his clunker beginnings, Gonzalez has pedaled off nearly 150 pounds, found a supportive community, and set and achieved goals for the first time in his life. He graduated from Tucson High where he was an athletic sort, playing baseball and volleyball. But after high school he gained weight, a lot of weight.

"I'd always been on the chunky side," he said. "I had jobs that didn't require any physical activity."

While attending Pima Community College, Gonzalez worked as a pizza delivery man.

"I ate a lot of pizza and never worked out," he said. "I didn't have any goals either, all I did was work, eat and eat some more."

Cycling changed that.

At first, Gonzalez rode once a week, five to six miles, at night.

Three months into his new passion, he rode more. Feeling comfortable and confident, Gonzales began riding in the daylight and commuted to work by bike, cycling 10 miles roundtrip.

"Still, I wanted longer rides," he said.

A friend suggested that his bike was too heavy, that he needed a hybrid.

He found one, then started to ride 15 to 20 miles each outing.

Then came a Trek road bike, then another Trek, this one lighter than the first. He's now using a Lightspeed. Gonzalez's bikes have shed weight almost as quickly as has. In all, Gonzales has owned five bikes in 18 months.

"The bikes are a real motivator," he said. "Since I paid so much money for the bike, I think I need to ride it every day."

He peddles more than 100 miles a week now. In addition to his daily 10-mile commute, he rides 10-20 miles on his lunch break, either along the Santa Cruz River portion of The Loop or to Gates Pass and back.

"I like the challenge of the hills at Gates Pass," he said. During the summer days with longer sunlight, Gonzalez rides

an additional 40-50 miles after work.

Upping his ride distance brought about a change in eating habits. He no longer chows down on numerous slices of pizza, but instead eats like someone who cares about health and fitness.

"I eat a lot of greens and less meat than before," he said. "I eat a big breakfast, and then eat less and less at the other two meals."

A key rule: never eat anything after 7 p.m.

As for his workouts, they've become more about reaching the next level in cycling rather than shedding pounds.

"For the first time," he said, "I set goals, goals like biking a certain distance on my ride."

Before Gonzalez discovered cycling, he had no plans.

"Now I have goals and a whole new life," he said.

Goals include riding a century distance in El Tour de Tucson.

"El Tour was on my bucket list," he said. "When I became a real cyclist, it was something I (knew I) would do."

For the 2013 El Tour, Gonzalez put on cyclist kit, headed out from the start-line into a wet, cold ride and 81 miles later crossed off another goal for his list.

He planned to cycle the 107-mile distance but because of the nasty weather conditions, he rode the 81-miles.

"It was a brutal," he said. "But I enjoyed every single mile. The rain made it miserable and I worked hard, and loved every minute of it."

For his first El Tour, it was an eventful ride. He forded Sabino Creek, high with water, and mindfully rode through running washes.

"I saw several riders fall, so I was careful," he said.

Four miles from the finish, his tire blew. He quickly changed and inflated the tube with a carbon dioxide cartridge, and continued grinding toward the line.

"Then I got another flat," he said. "Here I'd made it through all the rough patches and the sun had come out. I didn't have another cartridge. I was done."

That's when Gonzalez discovered what El Tour is all about.

"Another cyclist stopped and helped me; he gave me his carbon dioxide cartridge," he said.

With the cycling community's help, Gonzalez crossed the finish line. But he wasn't through.

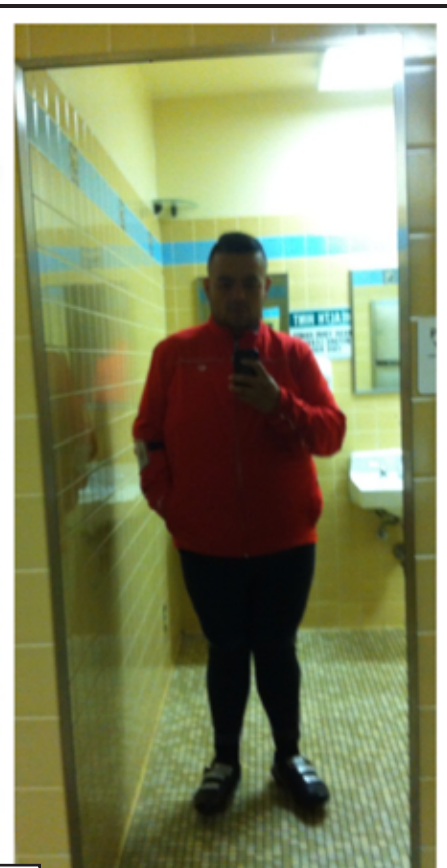
After the ride, after he went home, refueled and changed his tire tube ... and rode another 20 miles, this time along the Santa Cruz River.

"I set a goal of riding 100 miles that day," he said, "and ride a 100 I did."

Gonzalez's has set new goals. He plans on riding in the century distance in El Tour de Mesa, and hopes to losing another 100 pounds in due time.

"In another year I want to be racing in rides throughout Arizona," he said.

Gonzalez is now part of Tucson's cycling community, a far reach from two years ago when he only felt comfortable



Before and after. Photo courtesy Mario Gonzalez

riding after the sunset when no one would notice him.

"I'm a totally different person now," he said. "I like to motivate people, show them they can change and tackle something new - that they can be winners, too."

Lisa K. Harris is a cyclist and freelance writer. She is the proud owner of Gonzalez's second Trek, and knows that the magic Gonzalez finds in cycling is imbued in her new bike.



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