

# AN AMERICAN PILGRIMAGE

## CYCLING THE 9/11 TRAIL



On September 11, 2001, former New York City fireman Tim Brown was about 30 feet from Tower One of the World Trade Center when it collapsed into a maelstrom of toxic dust and materials.

Brown was no longer a fireman on 9/11, but he was instrumental in the rescue operation that tragic day. Brown was working for Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's Office of Emergency Management and was returning to the stricken tower with three paramedics when it collapsed. He soberly recalled that the lobby was so full of gravely wounded people that it was impeding the rescue operation underway.

"My maker decided it wasn't my time, because I should be dead," Brown said. "Anyway I survived, and will use my voice to tell the truth of what happened that day and who did it."

That's exactly what Brown, 56, has been doing for the past 17 years, giving speeches around the country, hammering home the point that more first responders and others have died since 9/11 from health problems — mostly cancer — than the 2,977 people who died on that tragic day.

Brown is working for the Pentagon now, playing his role in prosecuting the five terrorists who planned the attack on the World Trade Center. He says everything he does is to honor the memory of the "innocents murdered on 9/11."

And now he has another way to honor them — the September 11th National Memorial Trail ([911trail.org](http://911trail.org)).

The 1,300-mile trail ties together the three sites of 9/11 for cyclists and hikers: the National September 11 Memorial in New York City, the National 9/11 Pentagon Memorial in Arlington, Virginia, and the Flight 93 National Memorial in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

"The trail is absolutely another way to keep their memory alive," said Brown, a recreational cyclist himself.

STORY BY  
**DAN D'AMBROSIO**  
PHOTOS BY  
**JARROD BUNK**

"It's a very unique and interesting way to do it."

Eric Brenner, the vice chair of the September 11th National Memorial Trail Alliance, was one of a group of four riders who completed an inaugural ride of the entire route in 23 days earlier this year. Brenner, 69, is semiretired after working for state governments in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Illinois. A dedicated cyclist, he rode around the world with his wife in 1987 — "before kids," he said.

Brenner is also currently the chair of the Maryland Bike/Pedestrian Advisory Committee.

The 9/11 Trail is about half on-road and half off-road, Brenner said, and utilizes some well-known existing trails like the C&O Canal and the Great Allegheny Passage.

Brenner said there are some "killer hills" on the trail and one or two tough stretches every day.

Brenner reminisced about his experience riding the Trail, while explaining that the riders in his group stayed with families along the way rather than camping.

"One day we were staying with the most conservative right wing people you could imagine, the next day we were staying with hippies, but they had an equal reverence for the idea of a pilgrimage trail," Brenner said. "The idea resonated with people more than just a long bike ride would."

"When you look at the route we've designed, it certainly hits the historic sites of America, from Valley Forge to Independence Hall to Gettysburg, and obviously the three 9/11 sites," said David

Brickley, founder and president emeritus of the September 11th National Memorial Trail Alliance. "But it also hits those communities that have demonstrated resilience and perseverance, such as Johnstown because of the flood [of 1889 that killed more than 2,000 people], or Bethlehem, going from being the largest steel-making facility in the world to coming back now and really promoting tourism and taking advantage of recreational opportunities."

Brickley spent 22 years in the Virginia legislature where he chaired the state parks subcommittee. From 1998 to 2002, he moved over to the executive branch of state government as director of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. It was in that capacity that he chaired a multi-governors' conference on trails that was set for September 15, 2001, at the Crystal City Marriott, about three blocks south of the Pentagon Memorial.

Brickley had 1,500 people signed up. When the unthinkable happened just four days before his huge conference was set to begin, Brickley had a decision to make. A no-fly zone was being enforced across the country after one of the darkest tragedies to ever strike the nation. Brickley decided to go ahead with the trails conference.

"We ended up having 800 people," Brickley said. "Speakers coming from Europe couldn't be there because of the no-fly zone, but people were taking cars, buses, and trains in this country. It was a grand success."

After the conference ended, Brickley had an idea.

"I said we have to find some way to connect our love for trails and



The first group to ride the whole 1,300-mile September 11th National Memorial Trail pedaled through the Flight 93 Memorial in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, on April 15, 2018.

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greenways with this horrendous event that happened a couple of days ago,” Brickley told the conference attendees. “We can’t let people forget this national tragedy. And everybody agreed.”

Two years later, Brickley formed the September 11th National Memorial Trail Alliance.

“The support from government at all levels and communities has just been phenomenal,” Brickley said.

One of the reasons Brickley believes the 9/11 Trail is so important is the fact that it was 17 years ago now that the attack happened.

“We’ve got a new generation coming, and now some of them are just learning about what happened on 9/11,” he said.

Brickley believes the 9/11 Trail can serve as a forceful lesson for this new generation.

“What is so wonderful about it is it really brings so many communities together to celebrate the spirit of America,” he said. “I really believe it will be a pilgrimage trail in the making as the years go by. It will flourish more and more.”

Brickley is setting his sights high. He believes the 9/11 Trail will eventually rival the Camino de Santiago in Europe, a Christian pilgrimage route to the remains of St. James that dates back to the first century.

During the routing of the 9/11 Trail in 2016, Brickley and his brother-in-law were scouting western Pennsylvania when they came across an abandoned railroad corridor owned by CSX Corporation. The trail left by the rail bed formed a perfect connection for the 9/11 Trail. Working with CSX, Brickley hammered out an agreement to acquire the railroad corridor. The only problem: it would cost half a million dollars.

“I said, well, nothing ventured nothing gained,” Brickley remembered. “I wrote to the chairman and chief executive officer of CSX, telling him we have this contract and we’re going to find the money, one way or another.”

The year 2016 marked the 15th anniversary of 9/11 as well as the 100th anniversary of the founding of the National Park Service. Brickley decided to take a chance and suggest to the CSX chairman, Michael Ward, that it would be great if CSX donated the railroad corridor trail in recognition of these anniversaries.

“I got a letter back from Michael Ward 30 days later saying, ‘Dear David, yes, you’re right, it would be great, and we’re deeding the trail over to the 9/11 Trail,’” Brickley said.

Brickley in turn deeded the trail

to Somerset County in western Pennsylvania, which he said has been a great partner in developing the 9/11 Trail.

Debbie Borza lost her 20-year-old daughter, Deora Bodley, on Flight 93. Bodley was the youngest female passenger on board and was flying home to California after visiting friends on the East Coast.

Borza, 64, serves on the board of directors for the September 11th National Memorial Trail Alliance, and while she loves cycling, she says she won’t be riding the “up down down” route across Pennsylvania.

“Any cyclist who decides to ride any part of the trail, I know they’ll do it in honor of those who died on 9/11,” Borza said. “But particularly those who ride from the Flight 93 site to New York will have accomplished something amazing for themselves.”

Borza has been working together with others, including the National Park Service, to complete the design and construction of the memorial at the Flight 93 crash site, where 40 people, including her daughter, died.

“We don’t call them victims, we call them heroes,” Borza said.

The design for the 1,100-acre site is mostly landscaping, although it does include a wall of names and a 93-foot-tall tower with 40 wind chimes inside it.

“We’re all happy with the design, very excited,” Borza said.

But Borza believes the 9/11

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But time and time again I heard people wish they had taken time off to travel.

I was 30 years old, making what amounted to poverty wages ... and I loved my life. I saw magical places several times a year that many people dreamed of visiting once in their lifetime, and I had plenty of time to travel solo on my bike the rest of the year.

I'd announced to skeptical guests that they'd be climbing 5,000 feet up the pass to Hurricane Ridge in Olympic National Park, and a week later I greeted them as they summited. Then I coasted with them all the way back down.

I'd watched Orcas breach the diamond-studded waters of Puget Sound. I'd soaked in enough ocean sunsets to nourish my soul for a lifetime.

One thing I never did? I never sprinted to arrive first for lunch. **AC**

*Willie Weir has been a columnist/contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist for over 20 years. His first epic bike ride was 12 miles along the newly opened American River Bikeway in Sacramento when he was 10 years old.*



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Trail brings an extra dimension to the remembrance of 9/11. She sees the trail as a place where teachers in towns along the trail can educate their students about tragedy and resilience.

"All they have to do is stand on the path and they can then talk about 9/11, and all they're doing is standing on the trail but they can feel like they've done something to remember that day," Borza said. "I really want to acknowledge the men and women who built this trail. I'm in their debt for all

the work they do. They're producing an amazing experience for anyone who puts their foot on that path."

David Brickley summed it up this way: "Our goal is to have a wonderful hiking and cycling corridor, but equally important is to ensure that America never forgets the tragedy of 9/11 and what makes America important. That's our resilience, our patriotism, our get-up-off-our-knees-and-do-it." **AC**

*Dan D'Ambrosio is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist magazine.*

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