



Karen McKeachie's death is speeding work on the B2B Trail.

by Brynn Raupagh

Completing the Border-to-Border Trail was not on the radar of Karen McKeachie and her husband, Lew Kidder, last summer. They were working on getting a roads improvement tax passed.

In July, the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners had voted to put the millage on the November ballot. Kidder, an advisor to the board, was a little nervous when commissioner Yousef Rabhi said he wouldn't support the millage unless 20 percent of the funds were set aside for nonmotorized travel.

Kidder, a lawyer, and McKeachie, a civil engineer, were avid triathletes. They often biked on the county's rural roads, so "I had been focused on road issues," Kidder says. But Rabhi's "vote was absolutely essential to make it work. As it turns out, his vision was ahead of mine."

On August 25, McKeachie and Kidder took photos of bad roads for a website she was creating called Just Fix the Roads. The next day, McKeachie was killed during a training ride on Dexter-Chelsea Rd. She was heading east with two friends when a westbound pickup truck pulled out to pass another motorist and hit her head-on.

McKeachie, sixty-three, was a world-class athlete. She won more than 100 races and triathlons, taking her class in the Dexter-Ann Arbor Run seven times. Kidder says she enjoyed training and competing and they frequently trained together. Only five-foot-four, she used to get frustrated because he was taller and

could run faster. The secret to her success, he says, was she could handle pain better than most.

"When Karen died, I was looking for a legacy," Kidder says. He considered funding a scholarship at the U-M, where her pioneering contributions to women's athletics had never been fully recognized. But then, while raising money to support the millage campaign, he met Jeff Hardcastle.

Hardcastle, a recreational biker and owner of Hardwood Solutions in Chelsea, was raising money for nonmotorized trails. Though Washtenaw County's Border-to-Border Trail had been under development for more than thirty years, it looked like it would take another fifteen to twenty to get to the Livingston County border—and even then wouldn't reach Chelsea.

Hardcastle wanted to accelerate the timeline and expand the trail. In 2014, he founded the Huron Waterloo Pathways Initiative to advocate for a segment from Dexter to Chelsea and north to Stockbridge. In addition to facilitating trail design and rights of way, the HWPI set out to raise \$15 million to help pay for construction. The goal: to complete the entire expanded B2B Trail in just five years.

In Hardcastle's vision, Kidder found his memorial for McKeachie. They established the Karen's Trail Campaign within HWPI. "The Border-to-Border Trail fit perfectly with Karen," Kidder says. "Both of us believe in 'what you do now is what you leave behind.' This is a way of paying into the future."

Since 1984, Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission has coordinated the effort to complete a nonmotorized pathway across the county, primarily following the Huron River. As originally conceived, it would extend from the Wayne County border in the east to Livingston County in the north. With the addition of the Dexter-

Chelsea-Stockbridge arm, it will include seventy miles of trails and connect with the east-west Lakeland Trail across the Lower Peninsula at two points. That would create a forty-four-mile nonmotorized trail loop through Dexter, Chelsea, Pinckney, and Stockbridge, linking those communities to the Waterloo and Pinckney state recreation areas and Ann Arbor.

But the physical and financial obstacles are daunting. "The problem is this is expensive stuff," says Hardcastle. Each mile of trail is estimated to cost \$1 million. Bridges crossing the Huron River are another \$1 million apiece. Funding has been slow, and getting agreements between multiple government agencies time-consuming. "We needed to join forces [with WCPARC] to

get the trail done in a reasonable time frame," he says.

As a board member of the 5 Healthy Towns Foundation, Hardcastle was well placed to do that. Established after St. Joseph Mercy Hospital bought the former Chelsea Community Hospital, the foundation draws on a \$25 million endowment to promote healthy lifestyles in the towns

Lew Kidder found his memorial for his wife in plans to expand the county's Border-to-Border Trail. The hope is to complete the dashed sections (above) within five years.



MARK BIALEK

KAREN'S TRAIL

Karen's Trail will honor McKeachie's life in a way that reflects her passions. A world-class athlete, she won more than 100 races and triathlons, taking her class in the Dexter-Ann Arbor Run seven times.



COURTESY LEW KIDDER

the hospital served: Chelsea, Dexter, Grass Lake, Manchester, and Stockbridge. Some of its money supported nonmotorized pathways, says Hardcastle, who led the foundation's board when he formed HWPI in 2014.

"I had no trouble finding volunteers," he recalls. HWPI partnered with 5 Healthy Towns, signed up the Legacy Land Conservancy as a fiduciary, and hired Stantec to conduct design and engineering feasibility studies. And as a private entity, HWPI can cross county lines to complete portions of the trail in Jackson, Ingham, and Livingston counties.

Karen's Trail will honor McKeachie's life in a way that reflects her passions. Her father chaired the U-M psychology department and wrote a widely used textbook on teaching. Her mother was a librarian and community volunteer.

McKeachie's athleticism extended back to high school, when she tried out for Dexter's boys' cross-country team (there was no girls' team then). Despite beating all but two of the boys, she was rejected. Her father then connected her to the Ann Arbor Women's Track Club. Organized by Red Simmons, later the first U-M women's track coach, the "Michigammes" practiced at the U-M's facility. "She immediately found her life," says Kidder.

As a U-M undergrad, McKeachie lettered in basketball and volleyball, at the time just club sports for women. She continued to compete with the Michigammes in the Amateur Athletic Union conference and in 1974 qualified to compete in the AAU's national cross-country championship at Iowa State. After U-M turned down her request to wear a U-M singlet, she made her own of gold material with a Block M. She finished ninth out of 400 runners. The next year she was in the first fifteen finishers and was named All-American, the first woman runner from Michigan to achieve that honor. The women's track team wasn't formed until the following year, and Kidder says U-M has never acknowledged her achievement.

Kidder says she didn't get the U-M's traditional letter jackets for her achievements in volleyball and basketball. Bo Schembechler thought giving the leather-sleeved jackets to women would demean men's accomplishments, he says, so women got a cloth jacket. In 2015, U-M student Erin Finn, an All-American runner, heard about this. She bugged the U-M athletic department until it agreed to buy traditional letter jackets for all women athletes who competed between 1973 and 1993. "I can't tell you how happy that made Karen," says Kidder.

McKeachie's parents have pledged \$1 million to Karen's Trail. Kidder is contributing an additional \$100,000. The campaign will kick off on April 20 as part of the Governor's Fitness Awards at Cobo Hall.

The entire trail, including funds for long-term maintenance, will cost \$35 million, says WCPARC parks planner Peter Sanderson. The millage is expected to provide \$1 million per year to WCPARC for the B2B. The Michigan Department of Transportation's Transportation Alternatives Fund and the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund have each pledged \$300,000, and MDOT itself has committed \$1.8 million.

Planning and building the B2B Trail is extremely complex, because so many different private organizations and government agencies are involved, and many parts of the trail are in challenging terrain. The long timeline has also been a barrier—"it is hard to gain private-sector interest with a twenty-year vision," says Sanderson. But then, "HWPI came in and jump-started the whole thing."

Thus far, HWPI has completed feasibility studies on three segments of the proposed trail and expects to proceed with the first segment north of Chelsea between Werkner and North Territorial roads this summer. A segment east of Dexter-Huron Metropark and Zeeb Rd. is also in the works for 2017. Hardcastle is optimistic that a third segment along Dexter-Chelsea Rd. may break ground this fall. Eight or nine segments are required to complete the loop; he hopes to have two to three under construction every year.

The Dexter-Chelsea section is particularly meaningful because it is where McKeachie lost her life. Members of Common Cycle, a bicycle advocacy group, created a "ghost bike" in her honor. It was placed at the accident site by Bruce Geffen, a friend and fellow triathlete.

According to Suzann Flowers of the Washtenaw Area Transportation Study, between 2011 and 2015 there were 463 car-bike crashes reported in Washtenaw County. Of those, thirty-two resulted in serious injury, and seven were fatal.

The Karen's Trail Campaign will endow a portion of the trail in her name. But "the trail would not have saved Karen," says Kidder. "She wanted to ride at speeds faster than would be appropriate" on a path shared with walkers and recreational bikers.

"The trail will be appropriate for 99 percent of people who do want to ride,"

Kidder explains. "The irony is that she wouldn't have been riding on it. The family is not doing this for people exactly like Karen but are trying to benefit a wider segment of society."

"The B2B is more than just a trail," says Sanderson. "It links all parks. Users can train for a marathon or go for a picnic."

It's also part of a much larger network. In 2012, governor Rick Snyder outlined a goal to make Michigan the "Trail State," directing government agencies to make connecting existing trails a priority. The Iron Belle Trail, established in 2015, will extend from Detroit's Belle Isle State Park up through the Lower Peninsula to Ironwood in the Upper Peninsula via two separate routes: a 1,273-mile unpaved and hilly hiking trail and a 791-mile paved bicycle route that includes the B2B.

It, too, has benefited from local generosity: Ann Arbor tech pioneer Mike Levine has pledged \$5 million to the Iron Belle and other trails.

A short stretch of the B2B opened last year between Dexter and Dexter-Huron Metropark. The extension west to Chelsea may use a century-old rail line.

The "Boland parcel" was accumulated by William A. Boland, who bought a strip of land thirty-three feet wide from Ann Arbor through Dexter and Chelsea to Grass Lake with plans to construct an interurban line. It was never completed, and he sold the parcel to the Ann Arbor Jackson Railway in 1904. The state bought it in 1939, and gave it to Washtenaw County in 1966.

The parcel follows the south side of Dexter-Chelsea Rd. in Lima Township. The Washtenaw County Road Commission is clarifying the ownership and exact location of the property, says Roy Townsend, its managing director. HWPI will develop plans for the trail to minimize the impact on neighboring residents.

Sandwiched between the Huron River, Huron River Dr., and the railroad, the stretch east to Ann Arbor is the most challenging section of the trail. Steep embankments and marshland add to the difficulties. To minimize damage to the riverbank, plans call for no fewer than eight bridges.

The county will be seeking private sponsorship for those bridges. "We don't want a corporate monument with golden arches," says WCPARC deputy director Coy Vaughn, but there will be opportunities to tell a unique story with a distinctive design. "We want to turn bridges into positives for the trail with a strong sense of place rather than build the least expensive and bland alternative," says Vaughn.

One has already been spoken for: Karen McKeachie's family is sponsoring the first bridge east of Dexter-Huron Metropark. Its theme will address McKeachie's role in early women's athletics and her participation in the Michigammes. Kidder is working with WCPARC and the Huron River Watershed Council to develop a design that will complement her life. ■