The "Ghost Bike," a memorial to David Minor at the intersection of 13th Avenue and Willamette Street, is maintained by his mother, Susan.

NO MINOR PROBLEM
A cyclist’s death leads to a proposal to make 13th Avenue safer for bikes

BY SUSAN MINOR
For The Register-Guard

When our first child, David, the new love of our lives, was less than a year old, my husband and I took him with us on a trip to Black Butte Ranch near Sisters. We loved to bike, and were eager to include David in what over the years would become a wonderful family pastime.

Photos from that trip show a very small boy strapped securely behind me into a safety seat, smiling and looking around at the woods and wildlife with his head encased in what seemed to be an enormous red bike helmet with 2-inch foam padding.

I mention this, one of his earliest experiences on a bike, because it illustrates our near-obsessive commitment to safety where our children were concerned. To their great embarrassment, I made them wear life jackets at the wave pool; we positioned ourselves between them and the ocean before many people were aware of steeper waves; I even insisted they sit in the car to watch my husband set off fireworks in our driveway.

They all laughed at me, but I didn’t care. We had waited a long time to have children, and like all parents we wanted them to be as safe as possible.

As they grew, both of our boys would find bike lights and reflectors in their Christmas stockings. They would receive gifts of bike jackets with reflective tape — and of course, new helmets as they outgrew their old ones.

Even before our second son was born, I was active in securing a grant to establish a program to distribute free car safety seats to those in need. Later, I worked diligently for passage of both the mandatory car seat and seat belt laws.

How could it happen, then, 16 years later that our David was not wearing his helmet when he was hit by a car and killed in the intersection of 13th Avenue and Willamette Street in Eugene? We will never know. But while we wish with all our hearts that he was wearing a helmet that day, we also know that the neurosurgeon who tended to him in the emergency room told us that because of the severity of the impact, a helmet would not have saved his life.

So we have asked ourselves: What would have made a difference? Again, we will never know, but what we do know is that we never, ever, want another parent to go through the anguish we have experienced.

And so we participate each year in the Ride of Silence to bring awareness to the need for safer streets for cyclists. And I continue, five years later, to maintain the flowers at the "Ghost Bike" at 13th and Willamette.

Susan Minor of Eugene is the mother of David Minor, who died in a 2008 bicycle accident. She wrote this essay with her husband, John Minor.
Minor: Bike plan for 13th will be presented publicly Dec. 4

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In a midnight candlelight walk and vigil, his friends put the Ghost Bike there, both to honor David and to remind everyone to share the road. We have talked of taking it down many times — but when I am tending the flowers, I receive so many comments from cyclists, pedestrians and motorists about how the white bike does in fact remind them to be more careful that we have kept it where it is.

Safety, though, remains an issue. Each year that we have participated in the Ride of Silence, new families have attended who have lost a loved one in a bike accident during the past year.

So we have continued to ask ourselves, “What can we do?”

Then we saw the Capstone project rising just half a block from where David was killed. Surely, we thought, something will be done to protect these new students, children of parents with hopes and dreams for their futures, should they decide to bike the nine blocks to the University of Oregon.

How would they do that safely, we wondered, since the most likely route would be along 13th Avenue, which is one way eastbound?

After asking just this question, we were referred to LiveMove, a UO student organization whose members focus on the planning and design of transportation systems as they relate to a community’s quality of life and safety.

For a year, students from LiveMove studied this 13th Avenue corridor, from Olive to Kincaid streets, and developed a comprehensive conceptual plan to create a two-way buffered cycle track, similar to the one on Alder Street just east of the UO campus. The track would allow protected bike traffic both ways from campus to the Capstone project, which potentially could house 1,200 students.

The students’ research showed that more than 100 cyclists a day already are using 13th Street to travel west, against traffic, either in the existing eastbound bike lane, on the street or on the sidewalk — any of which obviously poses an increased risk of accidents and possibly death.

In addition to the Capstone project, at least two other large-scale student housing developments are under construction along this corridor. Their residents also will be using part or all of 13th Avenue to commute to school and to downtown, which has a number of new entertainment and restaurant options available.

Last spring, my husband and I attended the open house where the LiveMove plan was explained, and we heard that the changes could be made to implement this plan effectively for $150,000. What an opportunity, we thought, to ensure an increased measure of safety for these students, as well as others who will continue to use this corridor to travel to and from downtown. And what a fitting way to honor the memory of our son, a UO graduate in sociology and environmental studies, who loved his alma mater and the community where he was born and raised.

So we contacted LiveMove and met with Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy, offering to donate the $150,000 to make this plan a reality. Our hope is that it will be named after our son, David Minor, and that it will include a component of bicycle safety education and awareness so that accidents can be prevented and lives can be saved.

With the offer of our private funding, we hope that this plan will be embraced wholeheartedly by everyone. Certainly, downtown businesses will recognize the benefit of having a safe and easy way for more customers to come to their area, and residential apartment and housing owners will see the attraction to students (and their parents) of being on a safe route to the UO and downtown.

If anyone has concerns, we anticipate it will be business owners along 13th Avenue who possibly could lose some on-street parking spaces.

So those business owners, we would like to point out that studies in several cities consistently have shown that where safe bicycle lanes have been added, sales in businesses along the routes have actually increased.

These studies also cite the “human scale” factor, meaning that because they are moving more slowly than people traveling in cars, cyclists have an easier time both for viewing what the businesses have to offer and for stopping to shop or dine. A more detailed explanation of the LiveMove Downtown Campus Corridor plan can be seen at the LiveMove.org website.

Finally, we encourage members of the public to show their support for this project by attending the city’s first of two open houses from 5 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 4, at the Eugene Public Library’s Bascom gekson Room, 100 W. 10th Ave., where this plan will be presented.

Those who cannot attend but wish to show their support for this plan can email their support to Rob Infield, transportation planning manager at the city of Eugene, at rob.infield@ ci.eugene.or.us.