Zambia is a long way to travel from the United States to ride a bicycle. But the physical distance of 7,500 miles and 30 hours of travel time were small in comparison to the people we met in Zambia and the lessons we learned on our trip with World Bicycle Relief (WBR).

The participants in the “Africa Rides” program with WBR in May learned up close and personal about the ability of a bicycle to offer access to independence, education, and a livelihood for people in developing countries and at home.

In February, FK Day, president of WBR and co-founder of SRAM, addressed the 2014 New Jersey Bike & Walk Summit. Shortly after, Sandy Chapman, president of Tifosi Sales and a SRAM representative in the northeast United States, challenged us to join him in May on the WBR “Africa Rides” program in Zambia.

Founded in 2005, WBR began by partnering with organizations in Sri Lanka to help with relief efforts after the tsunami that devastated communities in nations along the coastline of the Indian Ocean. More than 24,000 locally assembled bicycles were distributed to displaced survivors.

Shortly after, WBR began designing and assembling the rugged Buffalo Bicycle. Specifically designed and built for developing countries, the frame is heavy gauge steel and easier to maintain because of the interchangeable parts, powerful coaster brakes, lack of gears, and the ability to build and repair it with simple tools. Through aid organizations in selected countries on the continent of Africa, WBR provides bicycles to support education, healthcare and micro-finance.

To date, more than 182,250 Buffalo
Bicycles have been distributed and sold in Zambia, Angola, Botswana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Integral to the operation in each country is a training program for mechanics to ensure skilled repairs and spare parts are easily available. At the local WBR offices 949 workers have been trained as assemblers. This is especially important since most Buffalo Bicycles are in rural areas where the need for transportation is so high.

Brian Moonga, WBR’s Zambia Country Director, explained the importance of transportation in a country like Zambia. “It is difficult for people to understand that a child must walk as much as 10 miles or more on a dirt path in the middle of the bush, far from a town and paved roads,” he explained. Only by riding a Buffalo Bike in Zambia did every participant on the “Africa Rides” program understand the distance and difficult terrain. We rode bikes on dirt paths, which were often narrow and bumpy with rocks. There is no grading of the incalculable paths throughout the country that connect thousands of villages far from urban centers.

Brian went on to explain how getting children to school makes a difference in the development of Zambia and the well-being of citizens. “The bicycle is more than transportation,” he said. “It is also an item of wealth. It means a child moves from owning nothing to owning something of value.”
Brian spoke of a girl in his class named Elizabeth who lived quite a distance from the school. “Since my father was a teacher, we lived at the school,” he explained. “Elizabeth would arrive late every morning. As she had to run through tall, dew-covered grass every morning to get to school, her clothes were wet and she was shivering, shaking and tired. She would lean up against me to get warm. I said to myself many times, ‘How can she be expected to take the same exam as me?’ Today, Elizabeth still lives in that same village. She has seven children and, although she is the same age as me, she looks like an old woman. Staying in school became too difficult for her, so she dropped out at a young age and became a mother. I am so committed to helping these children that I don’t mind when work interferes on my evenings and weekends. I take work calls any time. The clock is ticking for these children.” At the beginning of the week in Zambia, each “Africa Rides” participant assembled a Buffalo Bicycle. Except for the spokes on the rims and tires, everyone was faced with a box of parts, neatly laid on the ground. Then, under the sometimes amused gaze but always helpful attention of WBR staff, we all assembled a Buffalo Bicycle within several hours using a screwdriver and a few wrenches. Sandy was the first to assemble his Buffalo and take it for a test ride. But nothing prepared Sandy, and the other participants, for the reception the next day when the group rode six miles off the main road to the Muchuto Primary School — about 40 miles from Lusaka, the capital. Like everyone in the group, Sandy was overwhelmed when more than 700 children who, on seeing the arrival of the group on Buffalo Bikes, rushed from the field where they were waiting and surrounded the riders, greeting each with wide smiles, vigorous handshakes, and tight hugs.

The rousing bike distribution ceremony was attended by the entire community — local chiefs, government officials, parents, teachers from nearby schools, and representatives from World Vision, the program agency. Parents and students all had to sign contracts before claiming their bicycles.

After presenting a student with a Buffalo Bicycle, Sandy reflected on his experience selling expensive bicycles and equipment in the United States. “I have a new understanding of what a bicycle can mean,” he said. “The expensive bikes I sell for pleasure and recreation now seem meaningless compared to what a $140 Buffalo Bicycle can mean to a young person in Zambia. It’s not the money that
makes the difference; it’s a bicycle.”

Then, WBR took the group on a 7-mile ride along a dusty trail to the village of Paulina, a female recipient of a Buffalo Bicycle. At several points, riders, who consider themselves competent on U.S. roads, had to dismount and walk due to the steep and poor condition of the dirt path. Everyone was reminded there are no lights and in the mornings and evenings children walk in darkness.

Yet, as everyone rode with Paulina and her beaming friends, it became clear a bicycle can enable children to get to school more quickly and on time. Recipients of the bikes are chosen by a community group using criteria that includes distance and need. Every child must agree to bring several friends along the way to and from school on the back rack and top tube. Among the core tenets of the WBR Bicycle Education Empowerment Program (BEEP) is a bias toward giving bicycles to girls in keeping with the efforts of the Zambian Ministry of Education to alleviate gender disparities and improve female retention in junior high schools.

Brian, who majored in business at the University of Zambia, elaborated by telling participants about his experience as a student when he lived very close to his school. “Children in my classes were smart and capable,” he said. “But too many were unable to attend school on a regular basis or continue because distance imposes a hardship. It wasn’t academic ability that held them back; it was distance which subtracted equality at the start line. A bicycle offers every child a chance to get to the starting line, which is the school door, every day.”

By building and integrating rigorous assessments and evaluations into its work, WBR tracks the Buffalo Bicycles it
distributes and carefully looks at the social and economic impact on its workers, the mechanics who are trained and the recipients — school children, healthcare workers and small business entrepreneurs.

Another day, the “Africa Rides” group visited dairy farmers at the Palabana Milk Collection Center in the Chongwe District. With a Buffalo Bicycle, obtained under a micro-finance plan, a farmer can carry two large canisters of milk to the processing plant, and do so twice each morning and evening. Previously, it took two people, walking with one canister to get to the processing plant and they could only make one trip in the morning and one in the evening. Once farmers can transport milk by bicycle, the quality is higher because it gets to the processing plant more quickly. Just as quickly, income for the local farmers begins rising dramatically.

On a third day, the group rode to a rural health clinic in Mwembeshi with trained community volunteers who, on bikes, can each visit as many as 15 patients in a week instead of five or six on foot. Wearing his WBR overalls, a trained Buffalo Bike mechanic from the area was among the participants. After visiting the clinic, the next ride was with a volunteer to her village and then to the village of one of her patients. A few years ago, the patient expected to die of AIDS. He credited the intervention and attention of his community health care worker with helping him become healthy. It was the Buffalo Bicycle that enabled the healthcare volunteer to visit her patient on a regular and frequent basis. He described how, once when he was ill, the healthcare volunteer took him to the clinic on her bicycle.

Toward the end of the 10 days in Zambia, Brian indicated interest in making Lusaka a Bicycle Friendly City and in-
quired if it is an international designation by the League. “People are fearful of getting bashed by cars if they ride a bicycle,” he said. “I hope WBR can help people at all levels develop a bicycle friendly mentality and the political will to make it a reality. If it makes sense in Amsterdam and New York City, as well as small cities and towns in New Jersey, then it makes sense in Lusaka to incorporate bicycle-friendly infrastructure. Now is the time to educate people about commuting wisely and economically. We do not need to blindly let the automobile dictate how we get around. In a country like Zambia, the money saved on buying a car can go toward other essential needs. The majority of Zambians cannot afford a car but they can afford a bicycle.”

Brian and the deputy director of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Zambia identified an easement of nearly one mile for a bike path and are now seeking support to clearly mark it. Brian explained how he hopes bicycles will be part of a national effort to build 7,000 miles of tarred roads that will link urban and rural areas. “Thousands of people already ride bicycles in Zambia,” he said. “A new road network that does not account for bicycles will inevitably force them to the margins of the road and the thinking of motorists. The result will be many Zambians on bicycles injured and killed.”

Zambia is a beautiful and peaceful country of 14 million people in southern Africa. The friendliness of everyone the “Africa Rides” group met was overwhelming and contagious. The well-organized WBR program in Zambia helped participants of “Africa Rides” understand their connection to people no matter where they live or their personal and community circumstances.

“I have been truly humbled by the people I had the privilege of meeting who welcomed us into their schools, villages, healthcare centers and businesses,” Sandy said, summing up the unforgettable experience. “I have witnessed humility and courage and have seen the difference a bicycle can make.”

Perhaps the most important lesson of the visit to WBR in Zambia was the shared joy of assembling and riding a Buffalo Bicycle. Artificial barriers of nationality, race, class, gender and income were quickly forgotten when people undertook an easily understood and universal activity — riding bicycles together.

Karen Jenkins is a member of the League’s Board of Directors. Cyndi Steiner is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition.