

## BRETT AND TAM DONELSON

A couple closes the diversity gap by getting Hispanic girls on bikes.

# B

**Brett and Tam Donelson both believe** that the best way to empower the large population of Hispanic girls living in Colorado's Summit and Eagle counties is to give them bikes ... that they can keep ... if they commit to riding and racing them from the time they join The Cycle Effect until they graduate high school. That's why the husband-and-wife team—he's from Upstate New York; she's Australian—started their pilot program in 2011. She was racing—and winning—Xterra triathlons; he'd coached world-class skiers. But at a certain point, he got “sick of being in snow,” and his hopes turned into fate after he met a philanthropist at a ritzy Westin Hotel gym—who started talking to him about the beauty of charitable giving in an area with hundreds of miles of singletrack and an “adventure gap” between the white and Hispanic populations.

Here's an overlooked fact about the region surrounding the \$200-a-day lift-ticket resorts of Vail and Beaver Creek. The demographic most often featured is white, wealthy and recreationally advantaged. But some 50 percent of the population here consists of Hispanic families, many of whom lack a cultural context for Colorado-style outdoor recreation.

Traditionally, mountain biking has been a “white” sport. As such, Brett noticed, rare was the sight of a Hispanic kid on a full-suspension bike. The philanthropist (who has requested anonymity) told Brett that they could partner in filling the gap, as

long as the focus of the effort would be on girls, not boys. “I fell in love with that,” says Brett. “Because if you get girls involved [in a sport like biking], automatically the boys and dads think they can do it, too. But if you invite the dads and brothers into the sport, all of a sudden the girls won't do it.” Some people have given him flack for creating a girls-only team. “Really?” he responds. “Sons have had it good for thousands of years. That's why I stuck to my guns.”

In 2011, with a pilot program, Brett solidified the organization's demographic. And in 2013, he officially launched The Cycle Effect, with one other “volunteer,” Tam. They bought a trailer, secured sponsors, grappled with logistics and found a handful of coaches.

They also built relationships with the school district, other youth-serving nonprofits, a local race series and the Colorado High School Cycling League.

So many times at the end of a hard day, Brett would collapse at the kitchen table and tell Tam, “We can't do this anymore; it's too emotionally and financially stressful.”

But Tam believed that everyone should have the opportunity to ride a bike, “for the fun, the adventure, the freedom, the empowerment and the human connection.” She was passionate about leveraging these qualities to girls who lacked the financial means to get them. So she told Brett, “It's super hard, and if you want to be done, it's fine. But riding with the girls is the best part of our lives. It's what we talk about when we come home. So if we stop, we'll have to find something else just as fulfilling.”

“That was almost every month for the first three years,” says Brett. But they decided to stick with it. Along the way, The Cycle Effect became a thriving nonprofit offering benefits that were practically

Brett and Tam Donelson, shot near Vail with their dog, Zeke, have exposed hundreds of Hispanic girls to the joys of mountain biking.







All girls who complete three years in the program and graduate high school can keep their Liv bike.

unheard of. By 2014, it was providing a \$5,000-to-\$6,000 learn-to-mountain-bike program for each girl who signed up at a cost of \$140. The year-round program included professional coaching, loaner bikes, all clothing and accessories, travel to races and payment of race entries. In The Cycle Effect's first year, 18 Hispanic girls signed up.

One of them was Coco Andrade. "All of us were going through something, and Tam and Brett took the time to understand our cultural and social challenges," she says. Over time, she learned the proper techniques to ride a mountain bike, but more importantly "to look ahead and examine what's in front of me before taking action," she says. Now a 22-year-old pursuing a master's degree in social work at the University of Denver, she volunteer coaches several times a week. When Brett offered to pay her, she replied, "No. You've already done so much for me."

But while the girls fell in love with cycling right away, their families were another matter.

Culturally, having girls on a bike team was a big leap. For one thing, girls in Hispanic families haven't traditionally been as encouraged as their brothers to do sports. Secondly, they're often in charge of caring for siblings after school and on weekends. And as far as racing goes, events sometimes happen on Sundays, often saved for church and family engagement.

Another obstacle Brett didn't foresee: Resistance from families to fill out certain forms. "Some of the parents don't speak English, and others simply don't want to complete the forms because they fear the current political climate," says Brett.

But by this fall, The Cycle Effect had grown from those original 18 girls to 175, with teams in both Summit and Eagle counties. The program is different from other youth cycling nonprofits, which give kids

free bikes but never teach them how to *ride*. "There might be 1 percent of kids that continue to use a bike without a mentor or a coach, but when I applied for sponsorship with a bike company—that shall remain nameless—I was told that the company didn't give bikes away because the majority of kids will sell them," says Brett. One company (Liv) bought in, however, and any Cycle Effect girl who participates for at least three years and graduates high school gets to take her bike—plus all of the accessories—with her.

While the team started with 90 percent Latina riders, The Cycle Effect has tried to accommodate non-Latinas as much as possible. "Both of our counties had two young middle school girls die by suicide, and that was the point where we knew that we had to create a clear space on our application that made room for any girl, no matter what their income or demographics," says Brett.

The Cycle Effect covers the cost of races, allowing riders to focus on having a meaningful, fun time.



## The Cycle Effect has grown from 18 original members to 175, with teams in two counties.

Parents note that the program helps the girls gain valuable problem-solving skills and establish new friendships.

He also used to welcome seventh graders and up; he now welcomes girls in elementary school. One of the youngest is Angelie Regalada, who joined the team in fourth grade. Angelie's mom, Jocelyn, says Angelie comes home from rides "with lessons that help her through any kind of problem. She's made friends, the coaches are great, and she feels supported."

That's why Jocelyn took Brett up on an intriguing offer. In August, he started a biweekly pedal for the mothers of Cycle Effect riders. That quickly morphed into a ride for any local Latina. The first week he had 22 committed participants and a wait list of 60. Jocelyn was out there, though she's ridden a bike just twice in her life. She says she doesn't know "what she's supposed to be doing" and that cycling "burns her thighs." But like Angelie, she's expanding her world through cycling. And she has Brett and Tam to thank, for seeing a need and answering it.