

EREVAN, Armenia YEREVAN, Armenia--A lazy Sunday morning. Arising later than usual. A long week of work in the books, a promising week ahead. Now living in Armenia, I correspond regularly with colleagues, friends and family back home in the States. Birds chirp as I check some emails and enter the social media labyrinth.

And there I found them: farewell messages written to my friend, Anne Smedinghoff, 25, praising her brilliance, grace and kindness.

She was delivering a truck full of books to schoolchildren Saturday when it happened. A truck full of books. She was the first American diplomat killed overseas since a devastating assault on a compound in Benghazi, Libya, took the life of Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other service members.

How? Why? The story unfolded as the day progressed. The significance of her murder was both obvious and befuddling. I took solace to know that the world shared in the grief of those of us lucky enough to know Anne personally.

I met Anne at our alma mater, the Johns Hopkins University, in early 2009 during a team meeting to prepare for a summer bicycle trek from Baltimore, where she was finishing a degree in international studies, to San Francisco. Our mission was to raise funds, spread awareness and foster hope in the fight against cancer, and Anne took on the duty of managing our communications. That was no small feat in the dawn of the social media era. Tweets, Facebook posts, blogging, press releases, and beyond -- Anne ensured our stories reached family and friends back home, and supporters we met along the way, raising the profile of our organization's commitment to serve the cause of cancer awareness and prevention.

That tenacity emerged again when we hit the road. I was embarking on this trek for a second time, and I had seen fear and intimidation paralyze countless first-time riders at the beginning of their journey. The first few days of cycling snake through the Appalachians: Dizzying ascents, sweltering humidity and aggressive drivers are but a few of the obstacles that cause most to question their ability to make it all the way to California.

Not Anne. Not the quiet, fearless girl from just outside Chicago. She was tenacious. She reveled in the challenges. "When's the next water break?" "It's too hot!" "Another mountain?" Not once would Anne speak these oft-heard complaints. Instead, she admired the struggle. She savored the journey. She soaked in the scenery around us -- the Nebraskan plains, the towering Rockies, the sparkling Pacific -- and the people we met in communities across the country. The cancer survivors. The caretakers. The patients. She grasped the essence of an individual and focused on what made them special and how that could fuel us through the next challenging stretch of riding. Pummeled by heat, lightning, hail or downpours, Anne pedaled with determination, with a resilience to honor those we met along the way and for the memory of her grandfather, for whom she dedicated her ride. It was obvious we were in the presence of someone extraordinary.

At day's end, as others nursed sore calves and strained backs, Anne devoured memoirs scribed by retired Foreign Service officers. She soon took on the moniker "Officer Smedinghoff" for her disciplined demeanor and forthcoming adventures in the Foreign Service. Our Anne, the soon-to-be diplomat.

After the trek was over, she strengthened our team's bond through a mutual love for **adventure**, with a stream of chats, emails and social media as we lived vicariously through her global expeditions. Posted in Caracas, Venezuela, Anne took every opportunity possible to explore the city she was told was too dangerous -- much like Baltimore's inner city, where she served cancer patients at the American Cancer Society's Baltimore Hope Lodge as part of our 4K for Cancer team -- and take advantage of the glorious coasts, countries and continents within her reach.

Her adventures tickled our imagination and wanderlust, doubling down on the cyclist's spirit with a trek of her own through western Australia. She even took time back in May 2010 to support a new group of cross-country cyclists that I belonged to, driving a support van on the first day and setting up water stops for riders to reenergize and imbibe stories from the road as recounted by us grizzled veterans.

Anne expressed only excitement when time came to transition to her next post, Afghanistan. We learned of the unique culture American workers on the embassy compound adjust to, and how Anne seamlessly fit in. She worked actively to engage with her colleagues and locals in Afghanistan, avoiding the temptation to isolate herself from the challenges of development, diplomacy and stabilization in the "Graveyard of Empires." Photos illuminating Afghanistan through Anne's perspective showed shimmers of progress and hope in empowering women, the media, and cooperation among the many factions vying to secure a notoriously hostile land.

Three and a half weeks ago, our long-anticipated reunion, the first time I had seen her since 2010, had finally come to fruition. Four teammates from the 2009 Baltimore-San Francisco ride, together at last, to embark on a relay ride from Jordan's Dead Sea to the Red Sea. We would split into pairs and tackle 50 miles each. The first route took us through salty coasts and fertile fields in the dark of an early morning. Anne drove the support car behind us for 21/2 hours, illuminating our road with car lights while fending off traffic. She jumped in early to substitute for an injured rider, and when I finally joined her on the road, we were soon engulfed in a high-noon desert sandstorm, the likes of which we had certainly never faced cycling across America. The wind howled. The sand consumed us like shattered waves. Visibility was nonexistent. Anne, pedaling without clips, was impossibly cool during this torturous stretch of road. She cracked a few jokes as we passed groups of camels and Bedouins.

"Pretty damn cool, huh?" I shouted through the blistering wind. "We're in a bloody sandstorm!"

She never stopped smiling.

A few days later, we shared a taxi back to Queen Alia International Airport on the outskirts of Amman, Jordan, recalling our bicycle treks in America and Jordan, and imagining the adventures ahead.

For those of us lucky enough to have known Anne, there is a challenge in trying to separate her from the narrative of war and diplomacy and the infinite tragedies told and untold. Of another fallen human in this senseless volley of innocents lost. She is more than another grim salute splashed across the headlines. She reminds us of our fragility. Our blessings. Our abilities. She reminds us that when innocent children are killed anywhere in the world, that when innocent mothers are torn away from their children, and communities are

left to grieve in the aftermath of chaos and misunderstanding, that we have not only dishonored the treasure of life, but we have dishonored the spirit of a fallen hero.

And so she remains. Anne, the woman of immeasurable strength, of boundless **adventure**. Occupying space that ignites the imagination. Illuminating the path before us. Her courage and valor emblazoned in our minds as we bid her bon voyage on her next post.

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