Mill Valley Oral History Program
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CHARLIE KELLY

An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Debra Schwarz in 2015

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In this oral history, Marin County polymath Charlie Kelly recounts a life coterminous with the "greatest bicycle adventure of the 20th century." Born in 1945, Charlie grew up in Mill Valley and attended Tamalpais High School. After graduating from Tam, Charlie briefly attended College of Marin before enlisting in the Army, where he served for two years in the mid-1960s. When he returned to Mill Valley in 1968 he began working as a roadie for the Sons of Champlin, missing only four of their gigs in 42 years. Charlie describes how he got into Marin's bicycling subculture, making friends, racing, and building bikes with such legendary figures as Gary Fisher and Joe Breeze, and he shares the origin story of mountain biking, or "clunking" as he and his fellow pioneers originally referred to it in the early 1970s. He also began writing and publishing his own magazine during this period, *Fat Tire Flyer*, which became the title of his definitive history of mountain biking published in 2014. Charlie concludes his oral history with some observations on the special topography of Marin County as an enabling condition for the emergence of mountain biking culture and an evocation of the happiness he has experienced over the years as a husband and father.

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Oral History of Charlie Kelly

Index

Army…p.2
Ballantine, Richard…p.18
Bonds, Allen…p.6, 11
Breeze, Joe…p.11-14, 20
Brother…p.2
Caramagno, Denise…p.17
Champlin, Bill…p.4
Clunker Awards…p.21
College of Marin…p.2, 21
Cragg, Larry…p.10
Cragg, Wende…p.10, 14, 17, 21
Crested Butte, Colorado…p.14
Daughter…p.18, 26
Dawson, John "Marmaduke"…p.5-6
Fairfax…p.9-10, 13, 21-22, 24
Fat Tire Flyer (book)…p.20
Fat Tire Flyer (magazine)…p.17
Fisher, Gary "Spidey"…p.4-7, 9, 11, 14-16
Fred…p.9-10, 13
Graham, Bill…p.3-4
Grateful Dead…p.5
Great Depression…p.2
Haapala, Kevin…p.7-8
Invention of mountain biking…p.9-10
Kelly, Charles (father)…p.1-2
Kelly, Frances Blanke (mother)…p.1
Kelly Moving…p.19
Marin County Wilderness Wheelers…p.17
Marin Cyclists…p.7
Marin Museum of Bicycling…p.12-13
Marinship…p.1-2
Mitchell, Craig…p.11
Moitoza, Rob…p.3
Mount Tamalpais…p.22, 24
New Riders of the Purple Sage…p.5
Quorum, The…p.26
Repack race…p.10-11, 13-14, 21
Richard's Mountain Bike Book…p.18
Ritchey, Tom…p.14-16
Richman, Jeffrey…p.15
Sister…p.2
Sons of Champlin…p.3-4
Tamarancho…p.9, 25
Tierney, Maurice…p.18
Velo Club Tamalpais…p.7-8
Wallace, Mr. …p.20-21
Wife…p.26

Oral History of Charlie Kelly
June 8th, 2015

Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by Charlie Kelly, who made minor corrections.

0:00:00 Debra Schwartz: Hello, Charlie. My name is Debra Schwartz with the Mill Valley Historical Society, and I'm sitting here with Charlie Kelly, a local resident who grew up in Mill Valley. Longtime, how shall I say — how would you describe yourself, Charlie?

0:00:19 Charlie Kelly: Well, the way my high school class described me is polymath. Because they couldn't figure out anything to pin me down with. So polymath will do. [chuckles]

0:00:29 Debra Schwartz: Okay. Lifetime polymath and local resident. Okay, so today — did I say the date is June 8th?

0:00:37 Charlie Kelly: Yes.

0:00:39 Debra Schwartz: 2015. Charlie, let us begin, if you will, with a little bit about your family's history.

0:00:45 Charlie Kelly: My mother and my father both grew up in relative poverty. My mother left home two weeks after her 16th birthday. She graduated from high school at the age of 16 and left home immediately, and made her way in the world. She graduated from junior college when she was 18 — two weeks after her 18th birthday. She went to nursing school because it was something she could get a scholarship for, and she became a nurse. She took a job at Ross Hospital. My mom grew up in Arizona, went to junior college in Los Angeles, moved to Kansas for her nursing school, and made it back out to the West Coast to take a job in Ross Hospital, in Ross, which was then a TB sanitarium.

0:01:36 Debra Schwartz: And this would have been what year? And your mother's name, please.

0:01:38 Charlie Kelly: In 1940. Okay, 1940. She was 20 years old.

0:01:41 Debra Schwartz: And your mom's name?

0:01:43 Charlie Kelly: Frances Kelly. And Frances Blanke, B-L-A-N-K-E, was her maiden name. My dad is Charles Kelly, like myself. My mom took a job at the Marinship shipyards during World War II, because there was a big push on to build military equipment, and she became the nurse at the first aid station, and she was then just 22 years old. And my dad was actually a little older than draft age, he was born in 1908 and had served as a Coast Guard reserve, where he described his job to me as walking up and down the beach with a flashlight. He became a welder at Marinship building Liberty

ships. And at one point, apparently, as I heard it, he burned himself — I wasn't there — he burned himself and had to go see the nurse, and kept seeing the nurse, and the rest is *me*. But my parents bought a house in Mill Valley in 1943, and they moved from that house, which is on Laverne, to the house that my mom still lives in, which is 36 Matilda, in Mill Valley. They bought that house for $4,500 in 1945, and I grew up in that house; it's the only house I have ever been aware of as the family home. So my dad was not educated, but he was very well read. He was not formally educated because he dropped out of school at the age of 13 to help support his mom.

0:03:18 Debra Schwartz: And where did he grow up?

0:03:19 Charlie Kelly: He grew up in Cincinnati, and when the Depression hit, he was just 21 years old and he drifted across the country, spent some time in Portland running a — I believe it was a fur store — and then he took a job in San Francisco, once again working at a fur luxury goods store on Market Street. And when the war started, obviously luxury goods were no longer a viable job and everyone enlisted in the war effort. If you're not in the military, you're doing something for the war. And my dad once again became a welder over there at the Marinship. I'm amazed because I never thought of doing anything like welding when I was growing up.

0:04:05 Debra Schwartz: The Marinship was in Sausalito?

0:04:06 Charlie Kelly: Sausalito, correct. And there was actually another big yard in Richmond building Liberty ships. The Bay Area was a big Liberty ship-producing area.

0:04:15 Debra Schwartz: Victory and the Liberty ships.

0:04:16 Charlie Kelly: Right, and I was obviously born in 1945. I have a brother, younger; a sister, older. We are all separated by a total of about 30 months so we were all in consecutive classes in school. Tam High had three Kellys for two years. I was an indifferent student; I test off the charts, but I don't do homework, and the result is C level. [chuckles] And so when I graduated high school, young men like me, generally, at that time, middle-class young men smart like me, went to college. I did not get into any kind of real college; I went to College of Marin, where the only reason I went there was because if you didn't go to college, you got drafted. And I failed that too, because I flunked out of College of Marin in rapid order and went and served two years in the United States Army where I was never disciplined. I made E5 in two years, which is a pretty fast rise through the very minor ranks.[1] I did not get in any personal danger, I served mostly in Texas and Arizona, and when I came out of the Army in 1968, I was a very rare commodity in the Bay Area, if you will.

0:05:48 A healthy, robust young man who was not going to be drafted. And at that time, that is about four years after I've gotten out of high school, all my contemporaries were either looking at another two years of college or the draft themselves, but robust young men without a draft problem were kinda scarce; and this rock band, friends of

[1] E5 refers to a mid-level rank in the military such as a sergeant.—Ed.

mine, needed someone like myself to handle equipment. The test for whether I could get the job, the guitar player said, "Can you and one other guy carry a Hammond organ up a flight of stairs?" And I said, "Show me a Hammond organ and show me the stairs you want them up."

0:06:31 Debra Schwartz: Were you athletic and strong, or were you —

0:06:34 Charlie Kelly: Interestingly, I was a terrible athlete. I was the last chosen for any team. I'm not good at anything. I was 24 years old before I found the one thing I was really good at, and that's bicycling.

0:06:48 Debra Schwartz: Yes, oddly, I just interviewed Rob Moitoza and he mentioned that part, of the surprise of you actually getting involved in something physical, but we'll get to that later.

0:06:58 Charlie Kelly: All right.

0:07:00 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

0:07:00 Charlie Kelly: Well anyway, I took a job with the Sons and I was the roadie, drove all over.

0:07:05 Debra Schwartz: Sons of Champlin?

0:07:06 Charlie Kelly: Sons of Champlin, yes, I'm sorry. I worked for those guys on and off — well, every time they performed for the next 20 years, actually 40 — I missed four shows in 41 years. And those four shows —

0:07:23 Debra Schwartz: Wait, in 41 years?

0:07:24 Charlie Kelly: 42. It was 1968 to 2010, although they didn't play continuously. They broke up for 20 years of that so, I mean, I didn't —

0:07:33 Debra Schwartz: So you [worked] as a roadie?

0:07:35 Charlie Kelly: As a roadie, I did not miss a show. Well, I missed four, and I'll tell you which four. Bill Graham threw me out of the Fillmore in 1968, so I didn't go to that show. We were on tour with Three Dog Night in 1974, and we blew the engine on the truck and someone had to stay with the truck to get it rebuilt while the other guys rented a truck and kept up with the tour. I lost the coin toss, I guess, but I missed three more shows. But I had an excuse for every one of them.

0:08:07 Debra Schwartz: May I ask why Bill Graham threw you out?

0:08:11 Charlie Kelly: You can ask, but it's pretty complicated. I can tell you this, however: Bill actually had called the manager of the band and said, "You gotta fire this

guy, Charlie Kelly," and the manager said, "I'm not firing. We need a guy like that. Who do you think we got?" But he got over it, and we did many, many more shows for Bill Graham after 1968. And every show that we did, a Graham show, Mr. Graham would walk up to me and shake my hand, and that was it. We wouldn't have a conversation, but it was like, "I'm the roadie for the second billed band, what's it to you?" But he was always very gracious after that. Apparently I imprinted myself on him, and he saw I wasn't going away anyway, so I don't have anything against Bill Graham. I understand a lot of people do, I'm not one of them. But the issue was actually immaterial, it was just something that came up. Bill Graham had quite a temper, and I got on the wrong side of it. And when I say Bill Graham threw me out, Bill Graham says, "Bruno, throw this guy out."

0:09:21 Debra Schwartz: His henchmen came to escort you.

0:09:22 Charlie Kelly: Yes, yes. And Bruno is a foot taller than Bill. Anyway, yeah, that was the end. So in 1977, I thought that these guys are a great band, we're gonna make money, and I'll be set for life because these guys are gonna be a huge hit. Well, they weren't, and in 1977, stuff caught up and they broke up. It was interesting to me that I had drawn much of my identity from the fact that I was associated with this popular group. When you're in that position, you don't even know about your own resources, but there — "Geez, you guys. You cut me loose, and now what am I gonna do?" Well, I found that I had other abilities, and one of my abilities was I organize people to do stuff. And so my cycling hobby became more paramount because I wasn't on the road all the time, I started putting on these races for my friends with our crazy modified old Schwinns, and I became the de facto leader of, you wouldn't call it a large group, maybe three or four dozen people who are all fanatical about this. You'd have to call it a goofy hobby. As we know now, that goofy hobby took over the world, but I was a ringleader of the few dozen that really kicked it off the top of the hill.

0:10:55 Debra Schwartz: We're talking mountain biking?

0:10:57 Charlie Kelly: Yes, we are.

0:10:57 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

0:11:00 Charlie Kelly: In fact, Bill Champlin was reading my book, I saw him a few weeks ago, and he says, "Charlie, I'm reading your book. Where was I when all this was going on?" And actually, I was working for those guys, but the only overlap between the two worlds was I. The rockers didn't ride the bikes, bike riders didn't go to the rock shows. I have to describe meeting Gary Fisher because Gary Fisher and I shared this adventure. I was hanging out in 1971 with this girl who was a Grateful Dead fan, and she said, "You know, I know a guy. He's just like you. He hangs out with the Dead, and he's just a crazy hippie bike rider. And if you ever met the guy, you guys would get along great." So one day I'm riding along in San Anselmo, actually about a half mile from where I live now — and she called him Spider, she said his name was Spider. And there was a guy — two guys on bikes, hippie guys on bikes, at a time when anybody on a bike

was not — bikes were not the thing then that they are now. And just somebody else on a quality bike got my attention. This guy was all legs and arms and hair, and if you're gonna call a guy Spider, he looked like a good candidate. And I rode up and I said, "Well, are you Spider?" And, "this girl Rose told me I should meet you."

0:12:32: And he said, "Well, they call me Spidey because there's actually another guy who hangs out with the Dead goes by Spider, but my real name's Gary." And he was with another hippie guy, a bearded, long-haired guy, and he said, "This is Marmaduke, but his real name is John Dawson." And I go, "Well hey, where are we riding? You guys are on bikes, I'm on a bike, where we goin'?" And they told me that they were going down to the Grateful Dead office in San Rafael because John Dawson, aka Marmaduke, was the singer in a band called the New Riders of the Purple Sage, which had just recorded their first album, and Jerry Garcia had played pedal steel on that album. And they were going down to the Grateful Dead office to look at cover art for this first New Riders album, and I kinda flashed my rock credentials, "Hey, man, I know these guys. Of course I do." So the —

0:13:28 Debra Schwartz: These are all local performers, I mean —

0:13:30 Charlie Kelly: Well, they were not —

0:13:31 Debra Schwartz: Bill Champlin and all these —

0:13:32 Charlie Kelly: Sure, everybody —

0:13:33 Debra Schwartz: These were people I grew up with.

0:13:33 Charlie Kelly: Well the Grateful Dead moved to Marin County, but they were in Marin County at that time. And they were originally from the peninsula. But anyway, they were all living in Marin County by then. And they were not really the cult thing that they had become in the 40-some odd years since because at that time they were one of many very popular bands: Jefferson Airplane, Quicksilver Messenger Service, Creedence Clearwater. They were all Bay Area groups, and Grateful Dead were just one of them. So it wasn't quite like it would be now. And so a few minutes after I met these guys, we wound up in the conference room at the Grateful Dead office, which was on Lincoln Avenue in San Rafael. The conference room was on the top floor, a big table and all these photographs and drawings and so forth are scattered across the table. And Marmaduke puts on their album, which I hadn't heard; it hadn't been released. And I was surprised, it was pretty good. The bass player and Marmaduke were the only members of the band that were there, and then Gary Fisher and I. And these two guys, the musicians, are asking Gary and me — well, I knew they knew Gary better than they knew me, they just met me — they're asking us what we think about these images. And I'm really thinking to myself, "Why do you guys care what I think about — " [laughs]

0:14:52: "And what difference does it make to you because it's your band, your album?" But the amazing thing to me is that Gary and I obviously did express preference

for some of the images. The images we liked became the cover of that album. I saw it on the shelves like a month later. And the way things worked — Marmaduke and somebody said, "You gotta come down and pick your cover art." And only two guys showed up to do it; they showed up with a couple of other guys and that was the quorum. And it is astonishing to me that they asked my opinion, and even more astonishing that the stuff I liked wound up on their cover. I'm not taking credit for it, those guys pulled the trigger. But it was an amazing thing to see because, like I said, "It's your band, I just met you." [laughs]

0:15:46: So anyway, that was meeting Gary Fisher. And a couple of months later, I was at the flea market in Sausalito, and I was buying some furniture for this house I was renting in San Anselmo, and I was on my bike, and I didn't have any way to get back to San Anselmo. But I saw Gary there and he had a truck, and I said, "Gary, can I throw this stuff in your truck and you can bring it up to my house in San Anselmo?" He said, "Sure." So we put this table and four chairs in his truck, and I didn't see him for a week and I'm going, "Guy ripped me off for my table and 25 bucks worth of furniture." But no, it showed up, finally shows up at the house, and he looks around and goes, "Wow, who are you sharing this with?" And I go, "Well, nobody right now." He says, "You need a roommate." And there we were, roommates, and were roommates for the next four or five years, in that house and another house up the street.

0:16:40 Debra Schwartz: Where was that house?

0:16:41 Charlie Kelly: That was on Humboldt Ave, it was the first house at 21 Humboldt. And eventually that house got sold and we got kicked out, we moved to 32 Humboldt. And we moved without a truck. We just trudged up the hill with —

0:16:55 Debra Schwartz: This was what year?

0:16:55 Charlie Kelly: This would be about 1974 or '75, I would imagine.

0:17:02 Debra Schwartz: And you were how old then?

0:17:02 Charlie Kelly: I was just under 30.

0:17:05 Debra Schwartz: It just helps to get a —

0:17:06 Charlie Kelly: Right. I was 28 years old at that point. So anyway, we moved up the hill, and our house became really, ground-zero for the clunker stuff, because we had, eventually, a little while later, we had a third roommate named Allen Bonds. Allen is famous in the clunker crowd because he perfected the craft of modifying old Schwinns. We were all doing it, we all had those, but Allen did the most beautiful work of any of us, and he would help other people set up their old clunkers. And it's funny, the idea of going in business was not paramount, it's just 'cause we'd build our own bikes at our house and then people would say, "Hey man, I can't do this, can you help me?" And so they'd come over, and at our house we were always working on something, building up

somebody's bike and that helped create the couple of dozen of those bikes that started the movement.

0:18:14 Debra Schwartz: Can I just ask you to describe what it was like in your house? Was it one of those boy houses, just with crap everywhere?

0:18:19 Charlie Kelly: It was a boy house, yes. In the — what other people would call the dining room, let's see, a work bench was nailed to the wall, and we ate in the kitchen usually standing up. So yes, it was definitely a boy house.

0:18:39 Debra Schwartz: What'd the yard look like?

0:18:40 Charlie Kelly: It didn't really have a yard. We had a deck and that deck was just piled with used bike stuff and then we had kind of a driveway area, graveled parking area behind the house. It wasn't really a yard, it just was an open area and we parked stuff there, but it didn't have a yard and if we had a yard, it would've looked terrible. So we weren't the greatest of housekeepers.

0:19:07 Debra Schwartz: I imagine, in your telling this story, that there would've been a pulling of bicycles' enthusiasts, or people —

0:19:16 Charlie Kelly: Well, Gary and I were both the president of Velo Club Tam. We both served as president of Velo Club Tamalpais, and Velo Club Tamalpais was a bicycle club that I was an original member of. In 1971, there was one bicycle club in Marin County, it was Marin Cyclists; and we were a bunch of hippies, much younger, not in the same cultural page as most of the members of Marin Cyclists.

0:19:48 Debra Schwartz: What were they?

0:19:49 Charlie Kelly: They were older, they were straight, they had jobs. And we were kids, but we wanted to race our bicycles. Gary was already a bicycle racer; he was already a very good bike racer. But I wanted to race my bike; I found that it was the one thing I was good at, athletically. And it turns out that you couldn't race officially unless you are a member of a sanctioned club. But I didn't wanna join Marin Cyclists, which was a sanctioned club, and so a few of us, maybe a dozen or so, formed our own bicycle club, Velo Club Tamalpais, and mostly so we could race our bikes, but also so that we could order cool matching jerseys and all that stuff. And we had —

0:20:35 Debra Schwartz: So you had to have a letterhead and all that.

0:20:38 Charlie Kelly: Yes. And the letterhead –

0:20:40 Debra Schwartz: Where did that come from?

0:20:41 Charlie Kelly: The letterhead and all our artwork was done by an artist named Kevin Haapala. Kevin Haapala was a guitar player whose brother played in a band

closely associated with Clover called Flying Circus, and he was a great graphic artist. He designed our jerseys, he designed our letterheads and our business cards, and we had really, really nice stuff. Far better than — if you saw the real club, you'd go, "Wow, it looked better on paper." [laughs] So yeah, we had the —

0:21:16 Debra Schwartz: Trades or cash? Did you pay him?

0:21:18 Charlie Kelly: Oh, I can't remember what we did for Kevin, but he did great work for us.

0:21:23 Debra Schwartz: Yes, so you're bona fide now?

0:21:26 Charlie Kelly: Right. And at that point, I took up bicycle racing and even though I was a pretty good bike rider, any sport you pick up at the age of 27 the kids that picked it up when they were 14 are gonna be better. And then the other half of my life was — I'm still working for a rock band, which meant that I had to get in my truck and drive for weeks at a time and then come back and ride bikes, and pretty much everybody else that races bikes rides them every day. And so I raced one season just enough to find out that I couldn't do both; and one of them paid and one of them didn't. And then the other thing I found out is that bike racing is really hard. I mean, who knew that? [laughs] When you play basketball, half the people there get to win.

0:22:22 Debra Schwartz: Yeah.

0:22:23 Charlie Kelly: When you race bicycles, you never win. Somebody else always wins. After I found out I wasn't competitive anyway — I was a pretty good bike rider but not competitive at that level — I played on a recreational league basketball team and we won the championship, but I felt better about my athletic ability, even in a bar league basketball team. But anyway, yes, my racing career will not impress anyone.

0:22:53 Debra Schwartz: But you're in the world.

0:22:54 Charlie Kelly: I was and I got to appreciate, at least in part, what it must feel like to be in the big bike races. I mean, I know what it's like to ride in a big crowd with people bumping elbows, and I know what it's like to fall down in the big crowd and have three or four people ride over you, so —

0:23:13 Debra Schwartz: Are you wearing safety equipment back then?

0:23:15 Charlie Kelly: Well [chuckles] you're required to wear a helmet, and helmets were commonly referred to as hairnets. If you look at like a '60s bike racer the helmets were just strips of leather that would keep your hair in place while you fractured your skull. Once again, "hairnet," and that was all that was required. Now the helmet requirements have stiffened considerably since then.

0:23:46 Debra Schwartz: How about any kind of other —

0:23:48 Charlie Kelly: Well, gloves, but everybody wore gloves.

0:23:51 Debra Schwartz: Riding pants?

0:23:52 Charlie Kelly: Well, I mean, bicycle shorts. Now they're even less than your underwear, but at that time, they were scratchy old wool shorts that —

0:24:01 Debra Schwartz: Did they have pads in the butt?

0:24:02 Charlie Kelly: No, are you kidding? Oh well, they had — the crotch was padded for cycling, but the hips were not for when you hit the ground. And so no, there was limited safety gear.

0:24:13 Debra Schwartz: 'Cause you see the pictures, back in the day with fat tires and everybody's in jeans. [chuckles]

0:24:17 Charlie Kelly: Well, of course. And okay, now when we started racing the — well, we didn't call them mountain bikes, we called them clunkers —

0:24:29 Debra Schwartz: Why did you call them clunkers?

0:24:30 Charlie Kelly: Well, you gotta call them something.

0:24:32 Debra Schwartz: Yes, but where did it come from?

0:24:34 Charlie Kelly: I don't remember, they're just junk, it was junk. They were junk bikes, and the way that started, Gary and I were roommates, and we had our fine Italian race bikes, but a nice Italian race bike is not really practical for going to the store. You gotta wear the right shoes, you can't leave it outside. And so Gary had a pile of stuff he'd mined out of the back of a closed bike shop, and out of this pile of parts, we put together a couple of old balloon tire, one-speed, coaster brake bikes, just for town bikes. We had no further goal other than you don't wanna ride your Italian bike down to Safeway. So we had these one-speed cruiser bikes, and this friend of ours who lived up on top of the hill in Fairfax said, "Remember when we were kids and we used to ride our bikes on the trails, you remember that? Why don't you guys throw the bikes in the truck and we'll go take them out on the trail, see if it's any fun." I've told this story too many times, I'm pretty glib at it, but there were three of us and two bikes 'cause Gary and I had bikes and then there's the guy with the pickup truck. He drove us up there, and here's the trail and it goes into Tamarancho — I'm sure you're familiar with Tamarancho.

0:26:00: But anyway, there's a trail and so we started riding our bikes, two bikes, up this trail, and two guys would ride and one guy would jog, and when you're going uphill, that's no big deal. So we rode maybe a couple of miles, right? And generally uphill until the hill got so steep, we thought, "Well, you know, can't ride them anymore, we'd have to push, so let's turn back and turn around and coast back to the house." And then I found

out that when you're going uphill, it's not much different jogging as it is for the guy riding. When you turn those bikes around, and even though these are cheap bikes that are junk, they're totally junk, it's more fun to ride that bike than it is to chase your friends while they laugh hysterically and ride away from you. [laughs]

0:26:51: Even though the bikes were junk. So almost immediately, we had to make a bike for the third party, or the friend there. And so, because there was this trail there and handy to his house and we all had these bikes, we started taking them out on the trails. And it was far more of a social event than it was an athletic event because these bikes were heavy. You couldn't ride them very far up a hill, but it's really fun to go down the hill. So when you couldn't ride them anymore, you just pushed them, and half an hour of trudging up a hill. But anyway, there's a trail and so we started riding our bike up — you're talking, you're chewing the fat — and you get to the top of the hill and no one is in any hurry to leave. You throw the frisbee around, you hang out for a while, and then you cruise back to wherever. And every ride, at least in our geographical area, every ride pretty much ends with a downhill.

0:27:50 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

0:27:50 Charlie Kelly: Everything out of Fairfax is up, and everything back to Fairfax is down, and what started happening as these rides got bigger and bigger, the downhill got very competitive. But when there's seven or eight of you coming off the top of the hill, whoever is the most aggressive is going to be the first to the bottom, and that's not because he's the most skilled, but because he has less concern for your well-being —

0:28:17 Debra Schwartz: And perhaps his own.

0:28:18 Charlie Kelly: Than you do. [laughs] And he will ride you right off the edge of the road if necessary. But anyway, so we talked about it for a while, we thought, "Let's have a race. Let's finally sort this all out without anyone. We'll find out who's fastest."

0:28:38 Debra Schwartz: Is it all dudes here, or all guys?

0:28:40 Charlie Kelly: It was all guys except Wende, Wende Cragg, always came on all the rides. She lived next door to Fred, the guy who had had the pickup truck. So she and her husband, Larry Cragg — well, anyway, they got bikes too, and Wende was far more into it than her husband, Larry, who actually had to go to work on a regular basis. So Wende started joining our crew. But we talked about it for a while and we thought, "Well, let's have a race," and we knew the hill, the Repack — we learned a lot about the geography of Marin County by just riding around on all these trails. And we found this one fire road that came down a really steep hill and it ended right in Fairfax, and if we were gonna have a race, well, that seemed like the great place to do it. I was familiar with regular bike racing, I said, "We'll do it as a time trial," so that you don't have the problems of a lot of people on the, you know — they call it 'The Race of Truth' in professional bike racing. It's 'The Race of Truth', the time trial, means there is no strategy: How fast are you? The other people are immaterial; they're not there. So we

rounded up timepieces, some pretty funky time-keeping equipment, but we had a race and that was on October 21, 1976, and there were about six or seven of us there. Unfortunately, the document recording who was there — [telephone rings]

0:30:20 Debra Schwartz: All right, we had a brief pause there, and now back to it.

0:30:25 Charlie Kelly: In 1976, we took these timepieces, and a few of us went up on this hill. And I discovered something about athletic competition that I hadn't realized yet, and that is that every championship has to be defended. Allen Bonds, my roommate at that time, won the race, and we found that, first, our equipment was not very reliable. When you're doing as much as you can on it, things failed. And also we found that sometimes, when you're going as fast as you can, you fall down too. So the bottom line is that, we held another race four days later because, "Hey, that was so much fun." And besides, everybody else wants a shot at the champion — a shot at the title, if you will. And so we held another race four days later. And it's more than the competition, what I found out, because I was not the fastest rider. I was fast enough, but there were guys — Gary Fisher, and Joe, and a few other people — much quicker than I was. But there is almost no way in the modern world that you can turn on the adrenaline pump, and leave it on for that long. I mean, you can sky dive, you can surf. Those are all similar adrenaline junkie sports, but this was five minutes of everything you have. And most sports, five minutes of maximum effort, your stamina is gone, but this is downhill.

0:32:11 Debra Schwartz: You're not exerting physically, but mentally, you have to —

0:32:15 Charlie Kelly: Right. And you have to be sharp, obviously. There is something separating the winners from the losers. But it is just an amazing thrill, because we got very, very familiar with the road, and we did everything we could to improve our time. So we'd walk up and down to study the turns because a lot of the turns are blind, and if you know what's on the other side, you can maximize your speed to the turn. It was immediate. By then, we'd been riding clunkers for a couple of years, and I immediately wanted a secret weapon, which was: "Yes, let's build a bike just for this." And I asked a friend named Craig Mitchell if he would build a bike out of modern tubing, but to duplicate essentially the Schwinn — the clunkers that we were then riding — and he did. And for some reason, I was unhappy with the product and I sold it back to him. Boy, that would have been a collectible bike; I mean, beyond collectible, but I have no idea where it is, and the gentleman who made it is no longer with us. So we won't ever know where that bike went. And after that experience, Joe Breeze — my friend, Joe Breeze — had taken a frame-building course and had built road bikes for some of the guys in our club. And you have to understand, we talk these things to death.

0:34:03: When you're not riding, you're talking about riding, you're talking about what you're riding, you're talking about every aspect of what we were doing. And we talked bike design to death. And it was clear that there was one guy in our club could probably build a bike for this purpose, and that was Joe. So one day I'm out riding on my clunker, and here's Joe coming the other way on his. And I was actually right in the middle of San Anselmo, and I pinned him down and I said, "Joe, what would it take for me to talk you

into building a bike for this. You know, what we're doing? What would it take?" And he said, "I don't know. A few hundred bucks, anyway, I need to buy tubing and whatever." I had $300 in my pocket, and he had it in his hand a couple of seconds later. And I said, "Well, let's go." And if you know Joe, once he accepts an obligation, he will complete that obligation, and it will take three times as long as you thought it would because when Joe completes an obligation, there is nothing left to chance. And it actually took quite a while for me to get that bike. It was probably eight or nine months because, as I've explained, quite often when you build a road bike, there's a lot of history and there's a lot of lore and whatever that these things have been around for a while and so you can look and see what other people have done.

0:35:35: There was no precedent, there was no model. There was no nothing for Joe to work from. And he being the careful guy that he is, he spent a month on the drawing board before he ever got around to —

0:35:49 Debra Schwartz: So this is more than just a job, this is a personal challenge to him?

0:35:51 Charlie Kelly: That's right. And by the way, Joe Breeze has never had a job in his life. He didn't go to a minute of college, and he is a world-class engineer.

0:36:03 Debra Schwartz: Where did he go to high school? Did he do a shop class? Because I know — Steve Potts is a friend of mine —

0:36:05 Charlie Kelly: Tam. He grew up by the golf course there.

0:36:09 Debra Schwartz: He said that — Steve Potts, you know — he said that he acquired his skill at Tam High shop class. That's where he learned a lot of his ability.

0:36:19 Charlie Kelly: Joe tells me that he took every mechanical drawing class that they taught at Tam High, and to this day the guy just does beautiful graphic work. If he ever wanted a job, he could have a job doing that, but you'd have to wait a long time for the product.

0:36:38 Debra Schwartz: Let's just put a plug in for Joe's new museum here.[2]

0:36:41 Charlie Kelly: Oh, yes, well, why not. Joe is about bikes in every aspect of cycling and he's competitive, but he wants to put bikes under people for transportation. And Joe has spearheaded [it]; he's one of five people really working on the museum, but Joe is by far the genius behind it. And not that the other people aren't big contributors, but it's Joe's vision, really, and the museum is a magnificent, magnificent effort and it encompasses the mountain biking thing that Joe and I and our friends took part in, but it's about much more than that. It's about the history of cycling, the future of cycling, and also as a community center for all kinds of good works, if you will. He designed the building so you can give lectures there, you can show films there, you can use that as a

[2] The Marin Museum of Bicycling in Fairfax.—Ed.

base to present all kinds of different lectures or films or whatever.

0:37:46 Debra Schwartz: And that's in Fairfax.

0:37:47 Charlie Kelly: It's in Fairfax, yes. It used to be a grocery store and they've taken over the building. And as you know, Debra, [they've] done a beautiful job of layout. You can see that Joe thinks everything through.

0:38:03 Debra Schwartz: Oh, real museum quality presentation.

0:38:05 Charlie Kelly: Right, and Joe is living his dream as a curator of a bicycle museum; Joe dreams big and he also delivers.

0:38:14 Debra Schwartz: Really fun opening yesterday, by the way; good music, good food, the whole thing. Okay, so back to the eight months it took you to actualize this.

0:38:24 Charlie Kelly: And during that time, other people got onto what Joe was doing for me and he took eight more orders for bikes and so with his bike, that was a total of ten bikes. He built ten bikes. His was the first to be completed and mine the second, like four or five months later. Joe was on his right away [chuckles] and he won the Repack race on his bike on the first time out.

0:38:53 Debra Schwartz: So you come to him with the idea, so he builds himself a prototype, and then he builds you one.

0:38:57 Charlie Kelly: Right, and then he builds eight more for other people.

0:39:00 Debra Schwartz: So you are the mother and father of these bikes.

0:39:02 Charlie Kelly: Well, you know, I had the idea and the money, but Joe was the guy that could execute. And whatever my fame is in this cycling world, it is not as an engineer. Joe is the engineer, he's one of the finest bicycling engineers in the world because he comes from an engineering background. His dad built race cars, and he had a machine shop in his house. Took all those drawing courses, so Joe is just — he's a self-taught engineer. When he built his house in Fairfax, he did the architecture for it. I mean, who does that? When the town of Fairfax needed to rebuild a bridge that approaches Joe's house, Joe did the engineering for it and of course the town architect signed off on it, but it's well known that Joe didn't go to college to learn this stuff. I mean, he doesn't have an engineering degree, he's just really good. So anyway —

0:40:09: I have to tell you how I met Joe, by the way, because Joe has been my dear friend for 45 years. My friend Fred and I were driving Highway 37 over in Novato and here's this guy hitchhiking and he looked like he'd just escaped from the ZZ Top. He had a beard and he had hair down to there and it was Joe Breeze and he was like 18 years old and he had a beard down to the third button on his shirt. I can't believe this. I can't grow that beard yet. But anyway, we picked up the hitchhiker.

0:40:45: Well somehow Joe and I established our bicycling passion, our mutual bicycle passion, like within a few miles of getting in the vehicle, and Joe has been my friend absolutely ever since because it's impossible to dislike Joe. The guy is the most honest, ethical person I've ever met. I wish I could live up to his personal standards, but I fall far short.

0:41:15 Debra Schwartz: So in meanwhile, what about Spider?

0:41:18 Charlie Kelly: Well, Spidey and I, Gary and I, we're sharing the house and building these clunkers up. Gary was actually working as a mechanic on a bike race team in Europe when we had our first Repack races; he wasn't even around for those. But when he came back — I think he didn't get into his first race until we'd done four or five already. But when he came back, he was immediately competitive. And, in fact, Joe and Gary were by far the most successful at Repack over the 24 races that were held.

0:41:55 Debra Schwartz: So these names — Joe Breeze, Gary Fisher — these people that may be listening to this interview, they're gonna know those names.

0:42:03 Charlie Kelly: Of course they are.

0:42:03 Debra Schwartz: Because those are the bikes that they buy.

0:42:05 Charlie Kelly: That's right.

0:42:05 Debra Schwartz: They were people for you, but they were bikes to everybody else.

0:42:10 Charlie Kelly: Every bike in my backyard has one of my friends' names on it. [laughs]

0:42:14 Debra Schwartz: What are the names on your bikes in your backyard?

0:42:17 Charlie Kelly: Three: Fisher, Breeze, and Ritchey. And I'll have to introduce Tom Ritchey. After Joe had built the bike for me, and for —

0:42:31 Debra Schwartz: Do you have the original bike?

0:42:32 Charlie Kelly: Well, it's in the museum. It's at Joe's house right now actually. But after Joe built that bike, it was clear that that was the direction that a lot of people wanted to go and everybody also realized, "Man, it took you a year to get your bike after you gave Joe some money." And Gary, we'd gone out to Crested Butte because, well — boy, this'll be destroying the story — but anyway, we'd gone out to Crested Butte and Gary had taken his old Schwinn. And Joe and Wende Cragg and I were all on Breezer bikes. Well we got into Aspen after this big, gnarly ride, and the handlebar on Gary's old Schwinn just breaks right off, and it wasn't lost on Gary that, "Wow! Good thing we

finished the ride before that happened."

0:43:26 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

0:43:27 Charlie Kelly: And also that maybe this technology is dated. So Gary obviously had to catch up, but he also knew that. "Boy, it's gonna take a long time if you have Joe do it because Joe takes a long time." And Gary knew a couple of frame builders, a guy named Jeffrey Richman in Santa Rosa, and Tom Ritchey who lived in Palo Alto. And so Gary hedged his bet; he ordered two bikes from each of those guys, and he figured, "Whoever delivers first, I'm gonna get a bike, and then I'll find some people to buy the other ones," because there were a few other people who were expressing interest in this. Tom Ritchey delivered first, and so Gary got a bike from Tom. Tom built three. Tom built one for himself, one for Gary, and then one for a friend of Gary's who had been expressing interest. So Tom built three bikes, and then the other frame builder came through a couple of weeks later and Gary found people to buy those bikes. And once again, we got on with our lives and now we got cool bikes to ride anyway. Let's see, about a month and a half later, Gary calls me, he said, "Hey, Charlie, you gotta come over and check this out." And he'd moved into another house by that time, so I went over to his house, and he opened the trunk of his car and he showed me that Tom had built nine more of these frames, but Tom Ritchey was not part of our circle.

0:45:00: He lived 50 miles south, he was a heavy-duty cyclist, but he didn't have any connection to this market for these kind of bikes. And he thought, "These bikes are easy to build and, boy, I got rid of three of them pretty quick," but he found that he had no connection with the people that might wanna buy them. So in desperation, he turned to Gary and said, "Look, Gary, can you unload these bikes for me?" So Gary calls me and shows me these bikes, which are just beautiful, and he says, "Wanna help me sell these bikes?" Your entire life pivots on the answer to that question, and I said, "Yes."

0:45:39 Debra Schwartz: Wait. Did he actually say that your —

0:45:40 Charlie Kelly: He said, "You wanna help me sell these bikes?"

0:45:42 Debra Schwartz: But he didn't say your life pivots on this. This is just your understanding of that right now.

0:45:45 Charlie Kelly: No, no. I'm just telling you now that it's a casual question with a casual answer and things turn in amazing directions on very small events.

0:46:00 Debra Schwartz: Which you cannot know at the moment.

0:46:00 Charlie Kelly: Of course. And in fact, there was no way at that time to imagine or fathom what mountain biking became because, once again, at the time it was a goofy hobby, and it was expensive to get into at the level that we were — these bikes sold for more than Italian race bikes because they were harder to put together. Italian race bikes at the time, you could call a bike distributor and get all the parts that come on a race

bike because they're familiar with the product and all those parts are all worked out and available. But we were in new territory, so one part would come from one place and another from another. And at first, we just walked into the bike store and bought this stuff over the counter, which is like building a car by going down to the auto parts store and buying one part at a time — a pretty expensive way to build a car, and also an expensive way to build a bike. But we put a very high price on these bikes, as high as we figured we could get away with, which was $1,300 in '78-'79 dollars. 1979 dollars. Pretty expensive bikes. More than an Italian race bike. But we found that the market was unlimited. So Gary and I rented a garage in San Anselmo and started building our bikes. And I have to say that I had some very cool adventures along the way, but for about five or six months, it was me and my best friend building the coolest bikes in the world.

0:47:50: And who gets to do that for a minute? Who gets an experience like that? 'Cause we knew what we had; we knew there was nothing like what we were building. And of course other frame builders were picking up on it. It's not like we were gonna corner the market, but it turned out that Tom Ritchey could crank these things out by the dozens where it took a Joe a year to make 10. Tom Ritchey worked out 25 in a month and we — through an accident of just who we hooked up with and just our own individual contributions — had the right team in place at the right time to put this stuff on the road. Now, we got into this without a business plan. I mean, Gary said, "You wanna help me sell these bikes?" That was our business plan. And so there was no structure to our company, there was no way to say who was getting the profits, which didn't matter because there were no profits, we lost money continually. But anyway, it was the right people for the time. But the seeds of destruction were already there because we didn't have a business plan, we didn't have a coherent — we didn't know what the market was going to be. And in about four years the inherent problems with not having a structure to your company caught up and at that time, we were deeply in debt.

0:49:20: Gary comes from a fairly well-off family, and so he and his dad bought me out of the company because I was — from that six months where, boy, I couldn't get to that place early enough, well when the problems stack up, when every day you gotta deal with the fact that you owe thousands and thousands of dollars and don't have any way to come up with it, it puts a lot of pressure on you and it really was hard on the relationship. And so anyway, they offered me the way out and I took it and by then I was — I had this other adventure going on, I started publishing a magazine.

0:50:00 Debra Schwartz: So let's talk a little bit about the magazine now.

0:50:04 Charlie Kelly: I was about to.

0:50:05 Debra Schwartz: Yes, let's —

0:50:06 Charlie Kelly: In about 1980.

0:50:07 Debra Schwartz: Let's ride into that.

0:50:08 Charlie Kelly: Okay. In 1980, our experience with the road bike club led us to believe that maybe there is a place for a mountain bike club. And so we had a meeting at Wende Cragg's house and we thought — well, we picked a grandiose name, we were going to be the Marin County Wilderness Wheelers, right? And okay, what do you do with your club? What is the purpose of a club, right? Somebody said, "Well, we should have a newsletter." "All right, who can do a newsletter? Well Charlie, you sold some magazine articles, you can write stuff." And my girlfriend at the time was this woman Denise Caramagno — you might have met her the other day, she was at the opening. But she said, "Yes, we'll call it the *Fat Tire Flyer*." And of course, that would just put everyone on the floor. Of course we are going to call it the *Fat Tire Flyer*. So Denise and I put out this photocopied newsletter for, whatever, a couple dozen people and the irony is that it's not like there's a lot of news in there for people already knew each other and what are you going to tell people that aren't, you know —

0:51:11 Debra Schwartz: It's actually a really charming concept though.

0:51:14 Charlie Kelly: Right. But anyway, we made a big mistake. On the very first issue, we put issue number one. Well, what does that imply? Issue number two. And so people said, "When's issue number two coming out?" Well, the club never had another meeting, but the newsletter took on a life of its own. And so Denise and I gradually learned the craft of publishing because, come on, photocopying is easy. I mean, this thing didn't look as nice as the average PTA newsletter, but we learned it. And after about seven issues, we moved from the photocopied to getting it professionally printed, and then we got a graphic artist to help us with the layout and it started looking quite a bit better. Then a couple of years into that, Denise and I parted girlfriend-boyfriend company, and that got difficult because you are trying to do a business with someone that you had this heavy-duty stuff going on, and so she wound up selling her interest to a guy that I didn't even know 'til then. So I had a partner, half-owner; that that's the way it is. So once again, like the mountain bike business, there was structure, no agreement, no who-does-what.

0:52:49: I was writing pretty much everything, I was doing the layout, handling the subscriptions, and the other guy was writing checks out of his inheritance and basically going through it. But we struggled along because, in spite of the fact that we're not very good at it, we had no competition. It's the only publication for this market.

0:53:14 Debra Schwartz: Some of these photographs from the publications are included in your book?

0:53:21 Charlie Kelly: Oh yes. In fact, I can leave you a few copies. I don't know if that matters to you.

0:53:25 Debra Schwartz: We're talking about all of this, much of which is included in a book you've written.

0:53:32 Charlie Kelly: Of course.

0:53:33 Debra Schwartz: You've written a — what you're talking about now, your publication, your newsletter.

0:53:40 Charlie Kelly: Let me get to that in a minute here. When big magazine companies started seeing the demographics of mountain biking — and by about 1986, '87, mountain bikes were out-selling road bikes. And that's just too juicy for all the other — and so once the real publishers with real money and real ability got into the game, we were done. Because we were just a couple of guys making it up as we went along, and Rodale Press — those guys can put out magazines. And so their first effort would be beautiful. Anyway, it had a time, it had a place, and it's over.

0:54:30 Debra Schwartz: It ran its course.

0:54:30 Charlie Kelly: Yes, that's right. 1987, I walked away from it and I don't regret doing it, don't wanna do it again. A magazine is merciless. As soon as you put one to bed, there's another one to think about, and there's never any respite from it. I have a friend, Maurice Tierney, who publishes *Dirt Rag*, and he's in his 26th year. I'm going, "Man, I do not know how you do it. You got something in you that I don't." But anyway, in 1987, I got an offer from an English publisher — his name is Richard Ballantine, and he's from the Ballantine books family — and he put out bicycle books in England. And he had me write a mountain bike book. I whipped it out in a month, and I've been trying to atone for that for many, many years because it sucked. I'm sorry.

0:55:41 Debra Schwartz: What was it called?

0:55:42 Charlie Kelly: It's called *Richard's Mountain Bike Book* by Charlie Kelly. Because this guy, Richard Ballantine, he had a series of books, bicycling books, and the version distributed in England was beautifully printed. The version distributed in the United States was not; it was embarrassing. The images were terribly done, the artwork was distressing, it was just, "Man, I finally wrote a book and I hate it." I mean, gosh! Think about that moment in your life, "Boy, you finally got a book, you wrote a book. Too bad it sucks!"

0:56:21 Debra Schwartz: "I'm an author and I'm embarrassed."

0:56:22 Charlie Kelly: Yes. [laughs] I wrote for all the United States bicycle publications; and I had editorial positions with several of them. But in 1990, a week after my daughter was born, *Bicycling Magazine* fired me. Pink slip in the mail. I mean, they were headquartered in Pennsylvania. My title was West Coast Editor because if you're gonna write about mountain bikes, you pretty much gotta have somebody at ground zero. And the other side of that is that, having done my own magazine, I was highly critical of the complete lack of imagination you find in corporate publications. I'm not sure what it was that caused them to fire me, but I remember that I got really tired of the cliché cover photos which are all shot with a 300 millimeter lens. It can have splashing water and flying hair, but it's like if I photocopied a dozen magazine covers, they're all essentially

the same photo with different people. And I said, "Any problem with imagination here?" Because the thing about the *Fat Tire Flyer* — and I'll show you — every cover got your attention, and no two looked alike and they were not clichés.

0:57:51: But anyway, maybe that was it. I have no idea what it was, but I was clearly off the reservation, and I got fired with — I mean, it was just short of by e-mail. And at that time, I thought, "Well my daughter is not a week old, and I just lost the juicy job that I had." So I had to go do that piano moving thing again, which I did for the next 25 years. And because, even though the empire is microscopic, I couldn't be fired from it and I ran it myself.

0:58:28 Debra Schwartz: That's the name of your business?

0:58:29 Charlie Kelly: No, it was Kelly Moving. Yes. There you go.

0:58:32 Debra Schwartz: Right. Now, I'm seeing your hat "Kelly Moving" with the piano keys on.

0:58:37 Charlie Kelly: Yes, yes.

0:58:38 Debra Schwartz: Nice.

0:58:38 Charlie Kelly: But anyway, I just had a piano moving company, and I move pianos because, like I said, you can't get fired from it; they won't send the job to Taiwan; the world won't run out of pianos. [telephone rings]

0:58:55 Debra Schwartz: Okay.

0:58:57 Charlie Kelly: One of the aspects of my funky little magazine, and also writing for the various other publications, 'cause I wrote for pretty much every major bicycle publication in the United States at that time, a couple in England and other countries. And the upshot is that I had a written record of many of the things that I took part in. Only later did it turn out to be a valuable record of an era that we won't see again. I have heard so much disinformation and oversimplification of this lengthy and complex process that led to mountain biking that I knew that as a first-person participant, I could explain it better than anyone who just read about it somewhere and mostly read my stuff anyway. And there's nothing that irritates me more than the phrase "invented the mountain bike" because we didn't invent the mountain bike. What we invented was a sport and the sport created the machinery for it. I mean, once we started racing downhill, then it was gonna go in that direction. As long as you continue doing this, you're gonna have to think about what you're doing it on and it led inevitably in that direction. What we came up with was this goofy hobby of downhill racing and that drove everything else. But the idea of inventing the mountain bike —

1:00:38: The bike already existed. The mountain bike, the modern mountain bike, isn't a lot different from bikes that have been around for a long time, although of course

they're designed differently, but really all the elements have been around forever. So it's not so much that the mountain bike was invented; a culture was created that made the mountain bike necessary to be part of that culture. And it's a very important distinction. I don't make any claim to — I won't even say the phrase — but I won't make any claim. I know that I was a ringleader of a cultural group who eventually came up with this idea. And so anyway, it's a complex process, it took me 264 pages to explain it, and I was the only person who really could because I have file cabinets and file cabinets full of all the stuff that I generated all over those years. I have every magazine article that came out about it. So no one else could really write that book. And well, Joe could write it, but he won't. But I even said that to him, "Joe, you could write a pretty good book, but you'd never finish it." And he said, "Well that's why I'm making sure yours is the one I wanna see." Joe, by the way, is a huge assist on my book and he wrote the foreword. I wouldn't have anyone else write the foreword for me.

1:02:16 Debra Schwartz: Couple of things I want to ask you about this. In your writing — you didn't go to college, really?

1:02:22 Charlie Kelly: No.

1:02:22 Debra Schwartz: How did you become — I mean, is it a natural ability?

1:02:26 Charlie Kelly: Apparently, because the first article I ever sold — I was still on the road with the band and we had this crazy downhill race. And the other roadie — we're in San Diego and the other roadie had been up a little later than I had and so I was gonna have to wait couple of hours for this dude to wake up so we could get in the truck to go somewhere. I just sat around the motel room and started writing down about this thing that it was so exciting in my life then. And I wrote a story and I wrote it in a notebook first, then I went home and actually typed it up. Well, Gary was at that time working at *Bicycling Magazine* and he said, "Let me take this with me when I go back to Pennsylvania." And he dropped it on someone's desk somewhere and they said, "Hey, we'll buy it, it's pretty interesting." And so I sold the first article I ever wrote without even really submitting it, okay. And then, let's see, that would have been 1978. And then *Outside Magazine*, I don't remember how I hooked up with *Outside Magazine*. They asked me, or somebody who was associated with them asked me, if I would write this up and I did and that was a pretty good payday. I sold the first three or four articles I ever wrote with no rejections. Two rejections, I probably would have done something else. But turned out that I could string words together, and I'm functionally literate anyway. And yes, I'm not trained. I actually flunked English 1A.

1:04:09 Debra Schwartz: Remember when you spoke at the First Wednesday[3] and your English teacher showed up?

1:04:14 Charlie Kelly: Oh yes, Mr. Wallace, of course, well, he lives on Sunnyside here in Mill Valley.

[3] A Mill Valley Historical Society series in which featured guests speak on local historical topics.—Ed.

1:04:17 Debra Schwartz: Yes, but nonetheless —

1:04:19 Charlie Kelly: Yes, of course, I'm very proud to be able to do that.

1:04:21 Debra Schwartz: Did you flunk his class?

1:04:23 Charlie Kelly: No, but when I went to College of Marin, one of the classes that I did flunk was English 1A, and to pass English 1A, you had to write a 500-word essay. Well, I could knock that out right now writing behind my back and not looking at it, but at that time, a 500-word essay defeated me. I wouldn't have a problem with it now.

1:04:45 Debra Schwartz: So really, when I'm just listening to your whole story, what seems most apparent to me is that your passions have fueled your excitement about what you were doing. The camaraderie, you had good friends, the life that you were living has fueled your —

1:05:00 Charlie Kelly: Well, I have no way of measuring my passion against anyone else's however I know that I do stuff that other people never think about doing. It was interesting that when I was a roadie for the band — well, hey, the leadership is on the other end of the spectrum there. I was not the leader of that thing. But when it came to the clunker riders and putting on the races and just rounding up the people to do stuff, it turned out that I had this natural leadership ability that I wasn't even aware of, and I could organize events. And so I go organize the races, I also organized the Clunker Awards, which I have to tell you about. 1977, we've been racing at Repack for a year and we thought, "Let's have a really big party for all the people that take part in this," whatever, for the 30 or 40 people who even know about this stuff. And so rather than just have a dinner, I thought, "Well, let's have an awards banquet and we'll give awards to all the people that do this stuff. And, in fact, we'll figure out the people and then we'll figure out the awards that we need to give them." You know? I mean, it's that bogus.

1:06:22 Debra Schwartz: Creating your own scene here.

1:06:24 Charlie Kelly: Right, and so Wende Cragg did these amazing — she's a fabric artist — and she made these soft cloth awards, and I can't describe them other than each one of them took her many, many hours and I could never make her do that again. And so we rented the Women's Club in Fairfax, ordered up mountains of food and beer and oysters and everything. Well, and I'm the master of ceremonies, I got my tux on, I'm really on it. We are really gonna do this up, and so I'm over at the Fairfax Lumber picking up the charcoal to barbecue the oysters. And I'm driving the piano moving truck, the door comes down on my hand and severs the tip of my — this finger here. It's back on, but it changed my focus immediately. I'm getting ready to go to the dinner and being like that focus, the star of the show, putting on my own show. Now I got to go to hospital and get my finger sewed back on. And so I ran to the hardware store spurting blood, "Hey, call 911 please," and a cop car shows up seconds later and he says, "I called an ambulance," and I said, "Screw the ambulance, let's go." And I jumped in the car and he sirens me right down to Ross Hospital and he radios ahead so he comes skidding to a stop

in the parking lot there, by the ER. Some guys with a gurney ran one way and I ran past them going the other way.

1:08:05: And I said, "I got to deal with this 'cause I got some stuff going on tonight." [chuckles] And so they call in the hand surgeon and I said "Look, I don't suppose I could use a phone while you're doing this 'cause —." And they said, "Calm down, you're in shock, you're just scared, we understand you're injured." 80 people are arriving in the building and the charcoal and the tables and the rented silverware is in a truck parked by a lumber store and so I got to at least tell somebody where the stuff is, "Go get it." While the guy is sewing the tip of this finger back on, I'm using the phone with my other hand and issuing orders to people all over Fairfax, and then the guy says, "Okay, well, you're sewed back on, but you better hold this up above your shoulder level if you wanna keep the fingertip."

1:08:59: Well, it is the middle finger on my left hand, it had an enormous white bandage on it and so I got back to that place, there's my date, I got my tuxedo, and from the lectern doing this award banquet, I flipped this enormous white bird to the crowd. That's right. "I got to hold this up guys, and by the way, I'm not taking any pain meds because I'm drinking wine tonight" — 'cause everybody is bringing the 25-year-old bottles for the big party, and if I take any downers I'm gonna be face down. And so anyway, I couldn't take any pain killers, I just gutted it out and did my thing. We actually had an awards banquet the next year, but after that I got the bike company and it was a different world, but we did two of those awards banquets, and the second time I got through it a little easier.

1:09:50 Debra Schwartz: Intact.

1:09:51 Charlie Kelly: Yes.

1:09:51 Debra Schwartz: Well, one thing we haven't talked about here, but it's absolutely an essential element of this entire experience, is Mount Tam, the region itself.

1:10:00 Charlie Kelly: Okay.

1:10:01 Debra Schwartz: Here I am, a representative of the Mill Valley Historical Society, and I like to think about how an area forms people, and people form an area. And Mount Tam has done her part in all this.

1:10:16 Charlie Kelly: Well, there are certainly a lot of recreational users. Before a lot of stuff was even thought of to be off-limits, we were on those trails that are now off-limits, but they weren't then, 'cause nobody had thought, "Who is gonna ride a bike up here?" And of course, maybe we're the reason that some of those trails are off-limits, but there are trails that I can ride. And now, it's a bit reactionary, maybe in the '80s there was quite a bit of pushback, but the demographics have evolved quite a bit, and now it's seen as a middle- to upper-class sport, and the aficionados are in many cases professional people and responsible citizens, not like those crazy hippies without jobs. So the

demographics have evolved quite a bit and the pushback has — it's not like it went away, but it has softened up, and it's now seen as something that we can all get along, whatever you wanna say.

1:11:29 Debra Schwartz: Yes, right, hikers versus bikers.

1:11:31 Charlie Kelly: Right, well I don't like to see it as an antagonistic thing, and certainly I have said for, whatever, 30 years or so, that every hiker you meet when you're on your bike, you might as well assume you are the ambassador for your sport because they don't remember the nice ones, they only remember the ones that weren't, and so be an ambassador for your sport with everyone you meet because they're only gonna remember the people they didn't like.

1:12:00 Debra Schwartz: Well, you know, I own a hiking tour business.

1:12:02 Charlie Kelly: Yes. We know that, yes. [chuckles]

1:12:03 Debra Schwartz: And I consider bikers — I describe them as "natural mountain phenomenon," I call you all "biker birds." And there is a condition that rarely you may encounter, called (made up) "aggromania".

1:12:16 Charlie Kelly: Oh yes.

1:12:16 Debra Schwartz: And there are a few out there and it is very rare, but my feeling is that we are all out there loving the mountain and we take care of each other. And if we see "biker birds" we step aside and make space them for them as we would with any natural phenomenon: deer, mountain lions, coyotes sometimes.

1:12:38 Charlie Kelly: Let me ask you this: Have you seen personally any evolution in your time here in Marin. Have you seen the evolution of that particular —

1:12:49 Debra Schwartz: The dynamic?

1:12:50 Charlie Kelly: Vis-à-vis, shall we say? The bicycles and the pedestrians. You're looking at that from a different angle.

1:13:00 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

1:13:00 Charlie Kelly: And I am just wondering, have you personally experienced any evolution in that regard?

1:13:06 Debra Schwartz: You mean as far as people getting along better?

1:13:09 Charlie Kelly: Yes, yes.

1:13:10 Debra Schwartz: Yes. I think that personally I do, because I live it. I wave,

and if need be I am of assistance to any biker out there. Every biker is somebody's child, every biker is somebody that has feelings and thoughts, and my obligation as a human being on that mountain is to help everybody stay safe. And if that means I step aside because they are riding on loose soil, then I will happily step aside. And hopefully, I think bikers now, as the sport has become — you know, I think in the early years for you, the biking as a sport, a lot of the bikers didn't expect to see people out on some of the trails they were on, but now we are aware that everybody is out there. And occasionally there is this one horrible encounter that you will have with an individual, but that is no different than an encounter you may have with a hiker that has aggromania.

1:14:06 Charlie Kelly: Well, I didn't mean to interview you, but anyway, I'm interested in that aspect, I personally feel like there has been quite a bit of an evolution in that relationship and —

1:14:20 Debra Schwartz: And you talk to the local bike shops and they wanna know who is acting out on the mountain. And if — this is for people listening — if you should encounter somebody who is recklessly riding their bike on the mountain or putting others in peril or themselves, it's good to go to your bike shop and give them that information because bike shop owners know who's riding and bike shops owners want to be responsible and caring about their clientele.

1:14:46 Charlie Kelly: They have a vested interest, for sure.

1:14:47 Debra Schwartz: Yes. So I think nowadays, there is a lot more interest in everybody getting along and really, it starts and stops with your feeling about sharing the mountain, any individual's feeling about sharing the mountain.

1:15:01 Charlie Kelly: I am glad to hear that. When you talk about geography, Fairfax is uniquely situated to be a cycling town. Now Davis, California is dead flat and it's a cycling town because of that.

1:15:15 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

1:15:16 Charlie Kelly: And also the young population as university students. But Fairfax is a popular destination for both road cyclists and for mountain bikers. Most places here where cycling is popular, it's one or the other. But Fairfax is uniquely situated here in the Bay Area where it's a good destination for the road cyclist. I would say it's a jumping off point for the mountain bikers and the result is that every weekend, and you've seen this, Fairfax has hundreds of cyclists.

1:15:50 Debra Schwartz: Well, we are in Mill Valley, here I am with the Mill Valley Historical Society, it's exactly the same here. I think that the fact is Mount Tam is fertile ground for the creation of mountain bikes because of the topography and that is why —

1:16:08 Charlie Kelly: Well, and demography, demographics and topography and cultural — I mean, there were a lot of forces in play. And you can analyze them later, you

don't know that they are there when you are taking part. We can see now from this perspective that there was quite a bit of — we are living in an urban area and we live in a place close to a major metropolitan center, but with trails and undeveloped areas. And it's got to be one of the biggest undeveloped places with that kind of proximity to metropolitan areas. So, once again, it's unique geography of Marin County that helped lead us in this direction.

1:17:08 Debra Schwartz: And just in adding on to this, Charlie, I just would like to say that we have 85 miles of open space from San Francisco. This area was protected and salvaged in various ways by locals, not agencies.

1:17:25 Charlie Kelly: Well, one good example would be Tamarancho. Now Tamarancho — I started going there when I was about nine years old and I was a Cub Scout — it's a Boy Scout camp. And they would have the summer programs where you would ride a bus from Mill Valley to Tamarancho and you'd make lanyards and swim and hike and tie knots and all that stuff, and then the bus would bring you home and let your mom off the hook for the day. And then while I was a Boy Scout, my Boy Scout troop camped up there. And now, of course, it's a mountain bike destination. And because Tamarancho represents — I don't know how big it is, thousands of acres for sure — a huge undeveloped tract, once again, very close to a major metropolitan area, there was a lot pressure on the Boy Scouts too, you know. A lot of people would like to own that property and the Boy Scouts is not exactly an A-list, blue chip company, so the mountain bikers actually, I believe, have saved Tamarancho for the Boy Scouts because the mountain bikers said, "Look, we'll build the trail and the trail will be in all the places, you guys don't go anywhere, anyway," because the trail pretty much works the perimeter of the camp. And the Boy Scouts hang out in the middle and so this subscription or membership thing generates quite a bit of money for the Boy Scouts and helps them preserve their own activity center, and so it's a real win-win.

1:19:03 Debra Schwartz: Wonderful story.

1:19:05 Charlie Kelly: And the irony being, that's where I first took my town bike out on a trail. I was there for Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts and took my bike; and now I go out there and I got a little thing to hang on my town bike that says I can ride there and the trails are great, you know.

1:19:22 Debra Schwartz: Oh, wonderful.

1:19:23 Charlie Kelly: Yes. So it's just an example of the unique geography that has helped us out here.

1:19:31 Debra Schwartz: You certainly had quite a ride here.

1:19:33 Charlie Kelly: I'm not sure it's done, but —

1:19:35 Debra Schwartz: No, not yet so far. So as we get closer to the end of this

interview, we talked about your early years here, growing up here, people that you've known, the adventures that you've embarked upon, what haven't we talked about? Okay, what's the one thing —

1:19:57 Charlie Kelly: The family. I do have a family.

1:19:58 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

1:20:00 Charlie Kelly: I have been married, as I mentioned, for 29 years to the same individual and we have a daughter who just does nothing but please me, and she was straight-As through high school, honors in college, works in Los Angeles in a public relations firm where she's making more than her mom and dad combined, and she's 24 years old. So I have a family and I'm very proud of my family too. So that's one thing we missed. [chuckles]

1:20:33: Let's see, oh, and I play in an "amplified ensemble," if you will. It'd be called a rock band if it were in the '70s, but anyway, amplified ensemble, and it started off being pretty much just a hobby. I've been playing in really terrible cover bands for 25 years just 'cause I can, and I like to, something to do with your friends. But at my latest iteration this guy showed up who's just an amazing song writer, an amazing singer, and he turned us from about as average as you could be, to a pretty good ensemble and so I'm really looking forward to expanding on that because we will have our first public performance in about two months. We've been putting it together in the studio and we're looking forward to taking that out. Well, not on the road, but at least out of the studio. So that is that.

1:21:31: If I'm an average musician, it's only after years of struggle, but I do enjoy playing with my friends, and right now I'm very happy with the group that I'm in, which is, by the way, called the "Quorum" Q-U-O-R-U-M. It was harder to come up with a name than it was to write a song, who knew? But anyway, that's my other thing, my family, my musical ambitions, which are very modest. And I can't think of much else.

1:22:06 Debra Schwartz: If you could think of one thing to say to anybody that would put them at — you know, this is a difficult question —

1:22:13 Charlie Kelly: If I was a tree — [laughs]

1:22:15 Debra Schwartz: Somebody young may be listening to this at some point and it's always nice to have real sage advice or communication. You know, you talked about the Quorum, that's communication. What would you say to anybody listening to this, the closing of this interview, about – in your life, what you've learned so far?

1:22:38 Charlie Kelly: Well it's clear to me, and apparently to you also, that my passion for whatever I'm doing is extreme and I don't have any way of quantifying that with anyone else. But, you know, do whatever the passion is, because — and unfortunately, one of my passions has not been making money. [laughs] But I find that

the people whose passion is only that, there's nothing else in their life, you know? And my passion is everything but making money, and I have had an amazing adventure and I have no idea whether I was just lucky or whether I was gifted. I just know that the adventure was great.

1:23:19 Debra Schwartz: Yes. And I guess I would say, with you, that quite an adventure — adventure and passion and excitement and — I mean you lived a large life.

1:23:32 Charlie Kelly: Well, I will say this. I tell people that I had the greatest bicycle adventure of the 20th century, this is no longer the 20th century. But of the last century, I can't imagine anyone who had a better adventure. Because a lot of people are better bike riders, there's no doubt about that, and I wasn't much as a racer, but the things that I took part in changed the world. And once again, I don't claim to have directed all that stuff. I know that I did take part and I'll leave it to others to define whether I have personal gifts or just got lucky.

1:24:18 Debra Schwartz: Yes, well that certainly is a very big adventure.

1:24:21 Charlie Kelly: Yes.

1:24:21 Debra Schwartz: We'll close on that. Thank you so much for your time and for your stories and for your sharing.

1:24:25 Charlie Kelly: Too bad you're cutting me off six hours early, but anyway, I appreciate this very much. [laughs] Thank you.

1:24:33 Debra Schwartz: Thanks, Charlie.