

# EVERYDAY HEROES

ATIBA MBIWAN

## Grandfather of 11 helps youths broaden horizons through multistate bike rides

By Laura Berrios

For the AJC

For 29 years, Atiba Mbiwan has coached and mentored youths involved with the Bike Ride Across Georgia Dream Team.

It has been a labor of love. Mbiwan organizes and leads multiday and multiweek cycling trips for teens and adult mentors. He led the Dream Team's five-week epic ride from Miami to Maine this summer.

The bicycle journey, Mbiwan says, is a metaphor for life: Pace yourself, learn how to switch gears, don't hurry.

"Intergenerational life is something we don't have as much as we did in previous generations," he said. "The opportunity to have these young people doing something with adults, that's unusual. You don't get to play baseball or football with adults."

The cycling trip is "worthwhile physically, emotionally, spiritually – every way. You can't replicate it," he added.

The Dream Team began in 1994 for middle schoolers in Atlanta Public Schools. It allowed them to learn long-distance cycling and earn a new bike if they completed a seven-day BRAG bike ride.

Under Mbiwan's leadership during the past three decades, the Dream Team has grown into a nonprofit organization serving middle and high school students from across the state.

BRAG Dream Team clubs are in Atlanta, Brunswick, Madison, Milledgeville and LaGrange, with new clubs starting up in Augusta and Americus, thanks to approximately 25 adult volunteers across Georgia.

Mbiwan's bicycle journey started in childhood, growing up in the Jamaica neighborhood of Queens, a borough of New York City. When he was 10, he rode his bike to deliver newspapers in the mornings and afternoons.

One day, his supervisor asked all the neighborhood carriers if they wanted to bike from the southern to the northern part of Queens. At 14 miles round trip, it was the first time he had ridden so far from home.

"That experience really did plant the seed in me about bike riding outside the neighborhood," he said.

After moving to Atlanta in 1992, Mbiwan learned about BRAG and wanted to go on one of the trips, but he said it took three years before he got up the courage and enough time off from work.

He went on his first BRAG trip in 1995 and was also a youth mentor. He watched the teens struggle to cycle on hilly terrain from Rome to Augusta because they were on the wrong type of bikes. He was determined to get them the proper equipment.

Thanks to grants and donations from businesses, Dream Team participants get bikes and jerseys, and



Atiba Mbiwan, director of the Bike Ride Across Georgia Dream Team, poses on his bike in the organization's headquarters at Pittsburgh Yards in Atlanta. He led the Dream Team's five-week epic ride from Miami to Maine this summer. PHIL SKINNER FOR THE AJC

the club has tents, sleeping bags and everything needed for multiday long-distance cycling.

"That commitment I made early on has become my passion project," Mbiwan said. "I saw what it did to those kids who were able to complete (the trip) with the proper training and equipment. Their confidence and social skills went up tremendously."

Mbiwan's volunteer work intertwines with his career, having worked as a schoolteacher and then in philanthropy at two family foundations with the mission of serving youths. He is executive director of the Zeist Foundation, which serves youth organizations. The 64-year-old has three adult children and 11 grandchildren.

**HOW TO HELP:** If you're interested in volunteering or donating to the Brag Dream Team, go to [bragdreamteam.org](http://bragdreamteam.org).

LANA SMITH

## UGA student assists children with tutoring, connections

By Rachel Sandstrom

Covering Poverty

After an Athens-Clarke County student started to fall behind in school due to prolonged sickness, University of Georgia student Lana Smith connected the child and the child's family to a free health care resource in order to get the student back on track.

This is just one example of how Smith and other members of Equal Education for Athens go above and beyond for students.

The UGA nonprofit provides free online tutoring and resource referrals to 100 Athens-Clarke County elementary and high school students in need. Typically, parents will sign their children up for tutoring or teachers will refer students to the group, known as EEA, if they notice they are falling behind in school.

EEA tutors also help students with other needs, including ACT/SAT prep, transportation and even referrals to social workers.

"EEA has by far been the most rewarding, meaningful part of my college experience," Smith said.

Smith started off as a tutor her freshman year and felt inspired to get involved further with the organization, leading her to pitch the board the idea of opening a UGA student chapter. They ran with her idea and made her and another tutor student chapter liaisons. A year and a half later, Smith, a math, biology and art history major, became chair of the board of directors, a position she has held since.

"Our mission is to keep kids in school amid an attendance crisis, and keep kids doing well and instill a love of learning into them," Smith said.

Its strategy to execute this mission, and what makes EEA different from other tutoring/mentoring programs around Athens, is its tutoring base is made up solely of college students. This encourages long-term relation-



Lana Smith helped kick-start Education for Athens, a nonprofit that provides free online tutoring and resource referrals to Athens-Clarke County students in need.

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COVERING POVERTY

ships that often surpass a tutor's time at UGA, Smith said.

At its core, EEA strives to "lessen barriers" and provide educational support to Athens students and their families.

Jaymie Bromfield, EEA's nonprofit adviser, said her passion for the organization that Smith leads comes from her ability to impact not just the students, but also their parents and teachers. Providing math and reading tutoring to children whose parents struggle to do so because of a language barrier or serving as an additional resource to teachers who are stretched thin is rewarding, she said.

"Thank you letters from families and teachers, seeing that "aha" moment when a student finally gets something that they've been really struggling with, it really is a satisfying feeling," Smith said.

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