

Remarks of David Wilson, president of Bike Walk Alliance of Westchester-Putnam at dedication of the ghost bike for Merrill Cassell, Dec. 5, 2009

We've come here today to mark the death of Merrill Cassell, the international public servant and advocate for safe cycling, who died so tragically on Nov. 6.

Today would be his 67th birthday, and Merrill, so fit and vital, in the prime of his retirement from UNICEF, would have celebrated his birthday with gusto. I'll bet he would have taken a bike ride.

But he isn't with us for that celebration. Instead, his friends from the cycling community will gather here at the site of his death to erect a memorial in his honor and pledge to carry on his legacy, to keep his spirit alive.

Merrill, a member of the Bike Walk Alliance, was a man who dreamed of a community where children rode bikes to school and their parents rode bikes for recreation, to run errands and commute work.

Those of us in the cycling community came to know him through his blog and his participation at forums to promote cycling. On his blog, Merrill called on municipalities to install parking facilities at train stations, business and retail outlets. He often warned of cycling's dangers, encouraging cyclists to wear helmets and to be wary of motorists who view cyclists as a nuisance. He attended our Westchester Bike Summit in April, and our last communications with him concerned our victory with Westchester County, which had agreed to install bike racks on one route of its Beeline bus system.

How ironic that it was one of those county Beeline buses that killed our friend on Nov. 6. The Cassell family has yet to hear one word of condolence or apology from the county administration or Liberty Line since the incident. Why not? Is his death so inconsequential to the government than runs our bus system? Was his death such a non-event for the powers that be over on Martine Avenue or at the Liberty Lines headquarters in Yonkers? They may want this incident to go away. But we won't forget it and the installation of this ghost bike today is one way to keep that memory alive.

This ghost bike is one of thousands around the world that now stand as visual reminders of the dangers we face on the road.

The first ghost bike went up in 2003 in St. Louis, and today, there are ghost bikes across the US, in Europe, South America, and Australia. This memorial will serve as a reminder of the tragedy that took place on this corner, and stand as a silent statement in support of cyclists' right to safe travel.

Merrill lived his cycling dreams. He had a fleet of bikes – one for mountain trails, another for long road rides, and a third for short errands around town. He kept two in Florida for his trips to visit his daughter’s family. He did his grocery shopping by bike. He visited friends by bike. He cycled Westchester roads and trailways. He was a fitness buff and worked hard to live a healthy lifestyle. In his younger days he ran marathons and swam. In his final decade, he biked, swam and walked. Biking was good for a guy in his mid-60s, he said, because he could sustain aerobic levels over several hours, and then be good to go to enjoy the rest of his day. His seven-day program included a one-mile swim on Monday, two-mile swim on Tuesday, a two-hour mountain bike jaunt on Wednesday, a seven-hour sojourn on his road bike Thursday, and three rest days, when he walked from one to five miles.

He was living his dream on Nov. 6 when he left his home in Hartsdale for a ride. Along busy Route 119, he rode on the sidewalk, according to Greenburgh police. He had the traffic light and rode along the crosswalk to cross Aqueduct Road. There he was hit by the bus, went down, and was crushed by rear wheels of the bus. Police say there will be no charges filed against the bus driver in Merrill’s killing.

That fateful ride on Nov. 6 was Merrill’s last ride. But Merrill Cassell was a man whose dreams will live beyond his days on Earth. His death has mobilized the cycling community to action. Less than a month since his death, there’s a bill ready for introduction in Albany by state Sen. Andrea Stewart-Cousins and Assemblywoman Amy Paulin that we are calling Merrill’s Law. Already in force in 14 states, and under consideration in four others, it requires motorists to provide a three-foot buffer when passing someone riding a bike. It’s a law that will put motorists on notice that cyclists have a right to the road, and drivers need to respect it.

We hope the law will make our roads safer for cycling, where, as Merrill once put it, he’d “absorb the beauty of the countryside” on those long slow rides he loved to take.

“Bicycling is a great sport,” he wrote. “It enables you to see your neighborhood in ways that you cannot see by automobile, running or walking. You may realize beyond your wildest dreams that you can have a great vacation on your bicycle in places right in your backyard.”