

## One Choice Leads to Another . . . It Can Be Extraordinarily Difficult to Know What the Right Choice Is



**W**e all make choices with varied outcomes. Some outcomes are good, and others not so. Some that seem to be good may not be the best choice. The person who makes the decision has to decide which route to take.

In early September 2022, I made a choice that set off a string of bad choices which turned a minor task into a near crisis situation.

I planned to step a short distance into a city's wastewater lagoon to install a flow through-plug on the lagoon side of the effluent pipe. If you are having trouble following this so far, don't worry it's not exactly important for the bad choices I am about to admit.

I pulled the new to me light weight waders out of my KRWA work vehicle and put them on. These waders appeared never to have been worn and were given to me free of charge by a trusted friend. After I put them on, I was very pleased the waders were so

much cooler with greater mobility than the pair I usually wear.

In mid-August I nearly overheated cleaning out an influent structure that was full of solids.

With a contract crew the city hired watching and waiting

on me to plug the effluent line so they may begin their work I hopped on down the berm slope and stepped into the sewer lagoon, I felt the cool rush of sewer water on my foot. I felt the boot slowly fill with sewer water to the knee level.

I realized my choice of not testing the free waders in a cleaner water environment was a very bad choice.

Another bad choice was to reach down into the lagoon water and try and fit the plug into the end of the pipe only to fill the arm-length gloves with wastewater, which led to me reaching further down, allowing the waders to fill with sewer water over the chest portion. With my face turned sideways a half-inch from touching my cheek to the treated urine and feces of the entire town I figure out the



This photo shows KRWA Wastewater Tech Jason Solomon after being dunked and having waders filled with lagoon water when attempting to remove a blockage from an effluent line.

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The cyclist Brian is replacing tires and other parts on his bicycle in a makeshift shop at Wilson County State Fishing Lake.

end of the pipe is too small and my plug will not fit.

Defeated, I moved out of the lagoon as slowly as possible to not slosh the wastewater in my face. As I climbed up the berm and out of the water, I dropped the shoulder straps and a gush of water drained out of the waders. My clothes, wallet, chap stick, gum etc. were completely saturated.

In mid-August I had worn my usual heavy-duty waders to unplug an influent structure. This structure was full of solids and the work was much more extensive than I anticipated. With the temperatures reaching triple digits and working in the heavy waders I nearly overheated.

After finishing the job, I headed to my house to get my personal truck so I could trail to Chanute 20 miles away from my rural home near Altoona, Kansas to sign a note at the bank and to take my mother out for dinner as I had been out of town on her birthday.

Before I left, I made what I thought was a good choice and replaced the heavy-duty waders with a new lighter pair in my KRWA vehicle.

I left my house at approximately 3:00 p.m. and headed north on Highway 75. About five miles north of Altoona, the relatively flat elevation changes to a hill that climbs more than a hundred feet in elevation over a short distance. With the piercing sun it was unbearable to spend much time in the direct sunlight at this time of day. The temperature in mid-August had reached well into the triple digits, and it felt like a furnace outside.

### Meeting a bicyclist in 108° weather . . .

As I was cruising along with my air conditioner blowing out frosty air, I saw a man pushing a bicycle with a pull-behind cart seemingly full of stuff up this long hill. I immediately think of how miserable this person must be and what a struggle it was to push this bike and cart up the hill. As I approached, I saw a gentleman wearing a jersey tee shirt with numbers on it. I looked for a support vehicle – the car that follows and provides ground support for a cyclist in a race or a challenge or a

benefit. After seeing no sign of any other cyclist or tail car, I thought this person could die trying to make it to the top of this hill and thinking now that this was probably a person that drew the hottest leg of a bike across America for charity. And not seeing any other official type vehicles or cyclists and considering the blistering sun I pulled my truck over to offer this cyclist a ride to the top of the hill.

I had planned to promise that I would never tell anyone about this ride so he could still support his cause or get whatever donations per mile he was riding for.

As I stepped out of the truck and met the cyclist at the rear of my truck, the cyclist looked up with his sun-red face and before I could speak, the cyclist asked in a raspy dry



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voice, "Could I please get a ride to the top of this hill?" I said, "Yes, you can."

We first disconnected the bicycle from the pull-behind trailer. As we loaded it, I noticed the trailer wheels had all the hard rubber tread worn off the tire, and a makeshift piece of leather strap had been attached to the plastic wheel with screws. The contents of the trailer were hardly snacks and fluids for bicyclists riding for an organization or a specific cause. There was an open pack of bologna and some American cheese in a plastic wrap and a gallon of water that had to be near boiling in the sun. There was a tattered hiking backpack and miscellaneous items like a

2-foot solid steel bar an inch or so wide that Lance Armstrong wouldn't even carry on the tour de France.

As we loaded the bicycle, I noticed the smooth bicycle tires normal for paved surface cycling were actually knobby tires that were worn down to a slick.



Brian, the cyclist, relaxes near a creek waiting for the time to board the bus to see his mother.

With everything loaded we got into the front of the truck and I stuck my hand out to introduce myself. The cyclist looked me in the eye and said his first and last name.

Brian said he would never trust GPS in Kansas for biking route shortcuts again. The day before, he had followed his GPS, and it took him on gravel roads, and every house had a giant dog that chased him. He found the metal bar in a ditch and carried it to protect himself from the dogs. He said every dog chase had scared him but only once did he think he was going to have to use the bar to deter a dog.

As we began driving up the hill, Brian was rubbing his legs. I guessed Brian to be in his late 50's in pretty good shape. I asked if he had an injury or understandably, just tired legs? He replied, "I don't lie and I don't steal. The truth is the seat on his bicycle makes his legs go numb. He said it was even worse on gravel. I said that it must have been hard not being able to feel your legs trying to peddle with dogs chasing you, but on the up side you wouldn't feel it when the dogs bit your legs?"

He looked up at me; we both laughed. And he said he still wasn't trusting his GPS not to send him on gravel for any more shortcuts.

At the top of the hill, I asked what had him riding in the middle of Kansas during one of the hottest segments of back-to-back triple-digit sweltering heat days in a row.

He said his mother was recently placed in hospice and he was trying to make it home to see her before she passed in Bismarck, North Dakota.

There was no support vehicle or donations or riding for fun. Brian was trying to get to his mother via bicycle, and I later found out someone in Oklahoma had given him the trailer and bike as he had started in Texas walking to see his dying mother.

I could sense that Brian was enjoying the truck a/c and being able to sit down. I told Brian that I could give him a ride as far north on 75 Highway until I turn off to go to Chanute. I offered to buy Brian a new seat for the bike for the rest of his journey. He asked if there was a Wal-Mart because he had a gift card to Wal-Mart and McDonalds bucks. I told him that Chanute would be ten miles off of his route, but I would bring him back the ten miles to 75 Highway.

So, our journey began. On the way to Chanute, I planned to stop at a cousin's house who was repaying me for money he had borrowed a few days prior. While there, I saw two wheels with rubber tires that should work for his trailer. I offered cash for the wheels, but my cousin didn't know where they came from so I said, "they are free as a convenience tax for the money he borrowed!"

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The advertisement for Cunningham Incorporated features a dark blue background with white text. At the top, the company name 'CUNNINGHAM INCORPORATED' is written in large, bold, white letters. Below it, the tagline 'Your #1 Tank & Tower Service Provider since 1983' is displayed. The central part of the ad is a collage of four images: a water tower with 'Irrahs' and 'UNICA' on its tank, a close-up of a worker in protective gear using a tool on a structure, another water tower with 'HAWKS' and 'HAWKEYE, TEXAS' on its tank, and a worker on a ladder at sunset. To the right of the images is a list of services: Coatings, Cleaning, Inspections, Repairs, Accessories, Maintenance Programs, and Mixing Systems. At the bottom, the address '2012 W. 2nd St. Joplin, MO 64804' and phone number '620.848.3030' are provided.

Once in Chanute, I dropped Brian at McDonalds and I headed on to do my banking a couple blocks away. When I finished, I took Brian to Wal-Mart and we went down the bicycle aisle. The first thing on my list was a cushion seat. Brian said he had maybe \$30 on his Wal-Mart gift card. I asked what else he may need and he said a light so he didn't get hit at from behind like a few close calls. We had tires and a battery pack in the cart to keep his phone charged. Before checking out Brian said this would be way over the amount he could pay for and began putting items back. I told him I would pay for the difference to get what he needed for the rest of his trip on a bicycle to Bismarck. The total was a little over \$100, I paid for it and told him to keep his gift card as he had many miles yet to cover. I told him to pay it forward somewhere down the road. He would surely cross paths with someone in need.

The time was getting later, and I drove the ten miles back to Highway 75 and we both began changing his tires, and mounting a seat at a Wilson County State Fishing Lake. The tires taken from my cousin were a bit too big to fit the trailer and the axle and needed a bushing to work correctly. After roughly an hour and a half of, tire changing, light mounting and making some progress on the trailer tires, I found one bushing in the bed of my truck, but the other wasn't fitting quite right. Now pushing the time, I was to pick up my mother and her brother to take them out to eat. I told Brian the trailer tire wasn't quite right, and I had a birthday

**I offered to take Brian to Chanute for the night, and I would rent him a hotel room.**

dinner. Brian said he could sleep by the lake as he had been sleeping mostly along the highway whenever he got tired. He planned to take a swim in the lake.

I considered letting Brian stay at my house but I had just met him. I am a heavy sleeper and I could get whacked and then everyone would ask, "What kind of idiot let's a complete stranger stay at their house that has potentially made a few bad choices or at least choices that didn't work out as planned?"

So, I offered to take Brian to Chanute for the night, and I would rent him a hotel room. I had a bushing at home that I was sure would work for the wheel on the trailer and I would get his trailer fixed up in the morning, hopefully not losing more precious time for his journey.

I got Brian settled into a local hotel in Chanute and left. I was a bit late to pick up my uncle and mother. I explained how I had picked up a hitchhiker and brought him to a hotel room. Neither one of them seemed too surprised, but gave me the all too familiar side to side (you should make better choices) head shake.

After a nice dinner, lots of laughs, and a birthday wish I headed home and thought about Brian's journey – eating bologna and being chased by dogs. He may have made bad choices to put him in this situation, but he wasn't asking for help. He had put his head down and made the choice to journey to see his mom before she passed.

Then the lightbulb finally came on! I thought even if we get his bike in good operating condition, he would still have days if not weeks riding a bicycle from Buffalo, Kansas to Bismarck, North Dakota.



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## A bus ticket to Bismarck

When I got home, I began looking for bus tickets to Bismarck. Through a lot of searching and scheduling, I found a ticket for Sunday, which meant another day around the Chanute area, but in the grand scheme, a day later would still be sooner than Brian could ever dream of arriving by bike. I ordered the ticket and paid for it.

When I picked Brian up the next morning from the hotel, he had showered and shaved, and you could tell the night of comfort and having running water made a difference in his life.

I spent Saturday with Brian, and I took him artifact hunting in search of Native American stone tools at one of the places where I have permission. As we talked, I learned what had set Brian down this path of walking to see his dying mother. I was able to help Brian make better choices by understanding that everything you see on the internet is not what it is. And that the beautiful woman who is talking to you and acting as if she is in love.... probably isn't the person in the photo; it could be a man. Scammers have no morals.

Was that the only choice that had left Brian in this situation. I highly doubt it.

Not wanting to pay for a second night hotel I figured I had known this person for more than 24 hours so I let Brian stay at my house. Brian wanted to do something to show his appreciation for what he said I had done for him. Saturday late afternoon into the night Brian washed and detailed my

**“I am totally indebted to you for the rest of my life. I know you said it was no big deal but to me it is”.**

truck to a level the truck hadn't seen since it was off the assembly line. On Sunday I took Brian and his bicycle 77 miles to get on a bus to try and outrun the only choice no one gets to make....

Brian and I texted during his trip to Bismarck – and we are still in contact. He sent this audio text shortly after making it to Bismarck.

*Audio text from Brian, the cyclist:*

“Yes, I made it thanks to you Jason. You are wonderful. I showed my mom your picture. She started crying when I walked through the door. She is so happy I made it. So many people must have been praying because I went through a lot of difficulties and I made it because of people like you. I am totally indebted to you for the rest of my life. I know you said it was no big deal but to me it is. I will spread my karma around just like you spread your's. And I will be back down there, like I said I will have nowhere to go. Me and you have to go bar hoppin and you will hate it. Ha! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! I am going to continue to communicate with you and I hope you know our friendship is not over.”

*Jason Solomon works primarily as a wastewater tech at KRWA and trainer. He previously was District Environmental Administrator at the Kansas Department of Health and Environment southeast Kansas office in Chanute, Kansas. Jason holds a Class IV Wastewater Operator Certification.*



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