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The Ride of Their Life

By: Rick Farrant

Nathan and April Reinhard hatched the idea for the business in 2010 on a 4,641-mile, 100-day bicycle ride from Astoria, Ore. to the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

But Natril Gear's first product – bicycle saddlebags called Luggers – represents so much more than merely a carrying container.

The Fort Wayne couple, who moved here from Texas in February 2011, envisions a company that creates a community of people willing to cast away fears, take risks and reach individual potentials.

It's summed up neatly in Natril Gear's mission statement: "It's our goal to improve and enliven our world by making great products, encouraging people to try new things and helping others live their dreams."

In a perfect world, April said, "people would be satisfied, living up to their potential, having confidence knowing that they are valuable and willing to take risks and to try things. It's the opposite of living a life where people are afraid and don't believe in themselves. There is such a fear culture."

The origin of the Luggers – generically known as panniers – actually began four years before the couple's cross-country trek and shortly after the Reinhardts were married.

Nathan, a 28-year-old native of Hamilton, Ind., and April, a 29-year-old native of Plano, Texas, were encouraged by friends to explore the debt-reduction instruction of radio personality and best-selling author Dave Ramsey. It wasn't that the Reinhardts were swimming in debt; they just saw adhering to Ramsey's advice as an opportunity to avoid money-related marital tension and provide a bit of financial independence.

The bicycle trip four years later became a celebration of achieving financial stability – a stability that allowed the Reinhardts to quit working long enough to complete the trip. He'd been employed as a software engineer in the aerospace and defense industry. She'd been conducting market research for a newspaper.

What came next was a seemingly insignificant decision the Reinhardts made regarding the trip that led them down the road to Natril Gear. They elected to make their own panniers to save money and to make the bags more colorful. Most panniers on the market, they said, are rather bland.

As they made their way across the country, the couple's motley Luggers brought numerous compliments from other cyclists, who wanted to know where they could purchase the bags. When the Reinhardts told the cyclists they were handmade, the couple was encouraged to have them mass-produced.

The Reinhardts are now on the verge of producing the first batch of 130 with the help of a manufacturer in Uniondale, Ind.; they've begun selling the Luggers on the company website (www.natrilgear.com); and Summit City Bicycles & Fitness, has begun carrying the bags.

The Luggers, which sell for \$80 each, can be used for a variety of things, including transporting groceries, laptops, or changes of clothes.

The Reinhardts said they will work gradually to not only introduce Luggers nationally but also add other bicycle- and outdoor-related products to the company's lineup.

It is their hope that Luggers replaces the pannier moniker and that Natril (which is a combination of the Reinhardts' first names) becomes synonymous with all the good things associated with the similar-sounding "natural."

But the most important part of the brand is the idea of creating a community of people who not only eschew fear, try new things and reach their potentials but who also set an example for reconnecting people to each other in an increasingly fractured world.

Bicycling, the Reinhardts said, is one way to create bonds.

"We are in a culture where people live in the suburbs and oftentimes people don't even know their neighbor's name," said Nathan, who now works in information technology for Ambassador Enterprises. "But when you get on the bike path and people are out riding or jogging, they've taken time out of their day to do something. And people are friendly. They smile and wave. That's the kind of community we believe biking and outdoor activities can help build at a neighborhood level. Kind of bring that connection back."

It doesn't hurt, the Reinhardts said, that biking is a healthy pursuit that also protects the environment.

The Reinhardts are also working to create a community of like-minded people in another way: hosting 5- to 10-mile bike treks called Lemonade Rides. The name comes from the concept of making lemonade out of lemons – a philosophy the Reinhardts learned to embrace when they had several setbacks on their way to establishing Natril Gear.

During the rides, Nathan said, "everybody can just kind of come together and not worry about the things that are troubling them, the problems they are having."

Another offshoot of the building-community mission, April said, is making their house a sort of way station for travelers along the nearby Towpath in southwest Allen County.

The Reinhardts moved into the 1,760-square-foot brick house on three acres six months ago. Now, they want to welcome towpath bicyclists who may need water, food or first aid – or just want to visit.

"If they fall," April said, "we can bandage them up. If they're hungry, we can feed them. If they're on a big trip, they can spend the night here."

Such hospitality flies in the face of concerns about safety and privacy. But the Reinhardts, both Christians, believe their property is a gift meant to be shared with others – without hesitation or fear.

Said April: "Here's kind of what it boils down to: I don't want to let the bad that might happen stop me from doing the good that I could do. I feel the good that I could do means more to me than the bad that might happen.

"We want to be a refreshing change. We want to be different in way that I think a lot of people are longing for."