



Breaking the Cycle

Architect turned chocolatier **Dean Bingham** never goes in circles.

As a teenager, Dean Bingham used to declare he would live to be 100 years old. “Why not?” he says with a chuckle. “There’s no reason not to.” Back then, Bingham ran hurdles, and he believes they taught him an important lesson about living — and especially about aging. “There were always hurdles — you just keep running,” he says. “If you look forward, not backward, that’s pretty great. And if you spend all your time worrying about what happens next, something will.”

Now 75, Bingham has never let common conceptions around aging hold him back. In 2008, after four decades as an architect and at an age when many people consider retirement, Bingham changed careers and became a chocolatier, starting Dean’s Sweets. He insists the switch was less radical than it sounds. Both jobs require attention to detail and aesthetic sensibility, he says, but instead of designing buildings, he’s designing chocolates. More importantly, he’s happier with the new business. “Architecture, if you do a project well, maybe five years down the road your client will give you a backhanded compliment in some way,” he says. “Whereas chocolate, you offer some to somebody and it’s virtually instant gratification.”

He and his wife, Kristin, his partner in life and business, now run two retail

Bingham started out as a bike commuter in Boston before signing up for his first National Multiple Sclerosis Society fundraising ride, in 1991.

locations in Portland. They keep him engaged and interested and constantly troubleshooting, and he’s having enough fun with it that he has no plans to retire. He encourages others to make a similar later-in-life switch. “If whatever you were doing becomes less interesting, find something else,” he says. “There’s no time like now. I would challenge people: if you’re thinking about doing something different, just do it, because you have no idea what’s coming next. Keep busy, keep moving, all that good stuff. Don’t stop.”

This summer, he celebrated his 75th birthday by biking 3,000 miles, from Key West to Calais, to raise money for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. It was his 30th year of riding to support MS research, a tribute to another person who embodied the philosophy that Bingham embraces: his late father’s onetime roommate at a nursing home in Deer Isle, a guy named Charlie, who had MS himself and was quadriplegic. “He kept my dad going,” Bingham remembers. “Charlie would get him out of bed in the morning and keep him moving.”

Over the years, Bingham has biked across the country twice to fundraise for the cause. This year, on the trek from Florida to Maine, he spent 41 days on his bike, averaging about 65 miles a day, “which for an old guy is pretty good,” he laughs. He is, admittedly, going a bit slower than he used to, but not just because he’s getting older. Speed is simply no longer the goal. He stopped along the way to see friends and to visit with family. At one point, outside Charleston, his 83-year-old brother rode with him for 40 miles. “If you’re going to do these things,” he says, “you might as well enjoy the ride.” — JESSE ELLISON