

Ironman triathlon competitor Sabrina Gatlin spends hours on her road bike, training for the 112-mile bike rides that are part of these grueling biking-swimming-running events. But there's a problem. She lives in the Atlanta, Ga., area. The city has few bike lanes, few shoulders on roads and legendarily tenacious drivers.

"They're very aggressive," says Gatlin. Sitting at a small table at the Atlanta headquarters of The Coca-Cola Company, where she is brand manager for Dasani water, the 34-year-old has the glow of an athlete a decade younger. Her light brown hair is pulled back and her green eyes blaze intently when she talks. "The general public in Atlanta is not aware of bicycle safety."

Gatlin moved earlier this year to a planned community just west of the city that's designed for people with active lifestyles. It's close to running paths in the beautiful Sweetwater Creek State Park. It's also near the Silver Comet Trail, a 50-mile rail-trail that extends from the Atlanta suburbs to the Alabama line, where it will one day connect with the Chief Ladiga Trail.

Every morning Gatlin gets up at 5 and hits the trails near her house accompanied on runs by her two dogs, Calixa, a German shepherd mix, and Fiver, a Border collie mix. Afternoons and weekends she can be found on the Silver Comet. She bikes, runs and swims 10 to 12 hours a week, bumping that up to 20 hours in the months before a big event. To train for the 2.4-mile swim segment of the Ironman she uses the pool at her alma mater, Emory University, in Atlanta.

After graduating from Emory, Gatlin earned an MBA at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She worked first in adventure travel, which drew her into an increasingly active outdoors life. Then she made a leap to Coca-Cola.

Two years ago, she pulled together a team of marketing and public relations professionals to brainstorm ways for Dasani to foster a community program that would encourage interest in biking without requiring people to buy bikes first. They wanted to reinforce the connection between pure water and active outdoor lifestyles.

Gatlin guided her team into the perfect solution. She approached Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) with the idea that Dasani would sponsor a program to donate bikes for public use on rail-trails. Her proposal meshed perfectly with the RTC goal of increasing community use of the trails. A partnership, Dasani

Blue Bikes, was sealed. Trek bicycles joined up to provide bikes, rounding out the team. The partnership brought in the ideal spokesman, Lance Armstrong, winner of a record seven consecutive Tour de France bicycle races. (Dasani already sponsored Armstrong.)

In 2005 retro-style single-speed Treks were donated to eight trails—in Baltimore; Dallas; Pittsburgh; Orange County, Fla.; Rockmart, Ga.; Salt Lake City; Seattle; and Villa Park, Ill.—for use by community members, either free or at minimal charge. The bikes are located in publicly accessible lockers at each trailhead. Local trail groups and agencies operate each program.

Dasani did surveys to gauge the success of the startup, and Gatlin says, "All trails indicated that the bike users were amazed and pleased to have access to a community program that was free or very low cost." RTC Vice President of Trail Development Jeffrey Ciabotti says, "The feedback anecdotally is that it is a very popular program and working quite well."

This year Dasani Blue Bikes extends to six more trails—in Colorado Springs, Colo.; Greensboro, N.C.; Grand Rapids, Mich.; Lynchburg, Va.; Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minn.; and San Diego.

Ciabotti says Gatlin's healthy lifestyle and business acumen align perfectly in the Dasani program. She wants to spread the message of healthy lifestyles to others, and "the program is putting bikes into the hands of thousands of people," he says. "It's a unique national program," he adds, "that has the potential to be a national model. We expect this program to grow each year."

And even as she helps the Dasani Blue Bikes program grow, Gatlin is looking for more ways to get people involved in biking and other outdoor activities. She hopes to find a role in promoting Atlanta's remarkable new Beltline project—a \$1.6 billion, 22-mile loop of transit and bike paths built mainly on unused railroad tracks circling the inner city. RTC did the original corridor research 10 years ago. Eventually, the Beltline could connect to The Silver Comet.

"They're going to need people to help with fundraising efforts and getting the word out and I'm very interested in being a part of that initiative," she says. "I think that's what this city certainly needs."

Atlanta freelance writer Doug Monroe has decided to buy a bike so he can ride the Silver Comet trail.

Sabrina Gatlin:

By Doug Monroe

In Perfect Alignment



BOB MAHONEY