



[Home](#) / [News](#) / [News](#)

Tom Duncan: "His last acts on this earth were pouring into others."



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In late 2023, as the holidays approached, Tom and Diane Duncan were entering a season of life to savor. Married 33 years, they were empty nesters, with two grown children. Tom adored his granddaughter, and there was a grandson on the way. With retirement right around the corner, the couple were eagerly anticipating travel and more time on non-work pursuits.

For Tom, that meant cycling. Having gotten into it through a co-worker, Tom went "all in," as Diane recalls. "I bet he rode 1,200 miles in the summer sometimes. He just loved to ride. He was the happiest on a bicycle."



Diane Duncan (L) and husband Tom on vacation. Photo courtesy of Diane Duncan.

For some cyclists, cold weather means a seasonal break until the Spring. But not Tom. He had recently joined the Atlanta Winter Bike League (WBL), founded by cycling coach Robert Wilhite, to keep racking up miles in the cold with like-minded people.

“After the ride, he was so excited about his experience, he came straight over and shared that excitement and asked me if there was anything he could do to help,” Wilhite recalls. “I told him we could always use more ride leaders. His immediate response was: ‘Hey, sign me up.’”



Photo courtesy of Diane Duncan

This is how, on Dec. 16, 2023, Tom was pedaling south on Lee Street (SR 14/139) in Atlanta one of two ride leaders for one of the eight groups that day. With his partner at the front, Tom was in the middle but eventually moved to the back of the group, coming alongside riders who needed help.

It was at this moment, at the rear of the ride, that a distracted driver struck Tom from behind, killing him instantly. "His last acts on this earth were pouring into others," Wilhite says.

Tom Duncan was just one of 470 people killed on metro Atlanta roads in 2023. While that number decreased to 425 in 2024, stories like his serve as a reminder that each of the individuals killed had family and friends, and were uniquely valuable. It is one of the motivations behind this year's release of [The Human Cost of Mobility](#) to ask our leaders to take traffic violence more seriously and consider the impact of the lives lost.

Tom Duncan had an enthusiastic fan club in the cycling community and beyond. He volunteered at his church, had regular dinners with a close-knit group of friends, and was learning American Sign Language to communicate with a relative. To celebrate his 60th birthday, he gathered family and friends to attempt his first 100-mile "century" ride on PATH's Silver Comet Trail from Georgia to Alabama.

"He planned the whole thing, figured it all out, and gave us all copies of what we were supposed to do." Diane Duncan recalls. "We were the SAG [support and gear] crew... We met them at certain stops and made sure they had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or a

banana and something to drink. We had a little ceremony and gave them medals at the end. It was really cute.”



Nearly 800 cyclists turned out on Dec. 30, 2023 for Tom Duncan's Memorial Ride. Photo courtesy of Stephen Falkner.

The crash that took Tom's life galvanized the Atlanta cycling community. Despite morning temperatures in the 30s, close to 800 cyclists turned out to the Lee & White complex in Southwest Atlanta on Dec. 30 for a memorial ride that retraced the route of that WBL group. The ride paused at the site where Tom lost his life in order for a special ceremony to take

place. Taps was played to honor his military service, while a “ghost bike” was placed as a memorial.



The memorial ride stopped at the site of the crash to place a "ghost bike" and pause for "Taps" to be played. Photo: Reid Davis

“It was unbelievable to see the number of people, especially as cold as it was that day,” Diane says. “I just appreciated it so much.”

Following the crash, the driver remained on the scene and spoke with law enforcement officers, and he eventually faced charges and sentencing.

“We went to court,” Diane says. “It was one of the hardest things I think I’ve had to do in my life.”

As part of the sentencing hearing, the driver looked directly at Diane and her son and apologized for what happened. Despite the loss of life and, to an outside observer, an obvious degree of negligence in hitting a cyclist on a straight road segment on a clear day, the driver’s sentence consisted of community service and probation.

“It was very much, to me, a slap on the wrist considering the situation.” Diane says. “He was evidently distracted. He had a child in the car. I asked why there was not child endangerment [charges]. Or why there was not reckless driving [charges]. And none of those applied, for whatever reason.”

However, stiffer penalties cannot undo the damage a family and community experience when a life is taken. On the other hand, redesigning wide, fast, multi-lane roads like Lee Street that encourage speeding into streets that spur drivers to pay attention—with elements like protected bike lane lanes, sidewalks, safe pedestrian crossings, and visual cues like narrowed lanes and street trees—can prevent these tragedies from occurring in the first place.



Photo courtesy of Diane Duncan

“It’s a lot to lose your husband... but especially for something that could have been avoided,” Diane Duncan says.

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