

Friend honoring legacy of 9/11 victim

By **KEVIN MULLIGAN**
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ON SEPT. 7, 2001, at a Fresh Fields supermarket, David Sylvester heard the familiar voice of his close friend, Kevin Bowser shouting a hearty Yo! — from the express checkout aisle.

"I hadn't seen him in a while; we were both so busy, and with him commuting to New York every day," Sylvester says. "We got caught up and I looked forward to seeing him again that Sunday [at a post-Labor Day party]. Unfortunately, something came up and I couldn't make it."

Sylvester never would see his best friend, role model and neighborhood mentor again. Two days after the picnic, Bowser, 45, a computer whiz, was working at Marsh & McLennan's technology division on the 97th floor of the World Trade Center's North Tower. He never made it out, after the crash of hijacked American Airlines Flight 11 brought the building down among the dark soot of Sept. 11 terrorism in New York City.

"He meant the world to me," Sylvester says. "He was a great example of how to live and conduct myself."

Sylvester would find himself awed and moved by the number of fortysomething men, all friends of the devoted father, community leader and peewee football coach, crying at Bowser's memorial service.

Sylvester, 9 years younger than Bowser, was one of them.

"You think you know someone real well like I did Kevin, growing up together [in Kingsessing]," Sylvester says. "But seeing that really affected me. It showed the impact he had on so many people's lives, not just mine."

He can't remember when, exactly, it hit him during the sad yet uplifting celebration of Bowser's life. But Sylvester recalls leaving the service knowing Bowser's imprint on the lives of many would not end in death.

"I decided, 'It can't end here,'" he says. "He can't die here."

Sylvester, 38, a personal trainer/fitness guru and community volunteer to the young and aged, thinks big and out of the box, with no such words in his vocabulary as "can't" or "impossible." Think African-American Pat Croce on a



DAVID MAIALETTI/Daily News

"I'm also trying to show kids and everybody that whatever it is you want to do, if you put your mind to it, you can do it. That's what Kevin was about."

DAVID SYLVESTER (above)
on his bicycle trip through Africa
that will help support a scholarship fund in memory
of friend Kevin Bowser (right), who died on Sept. 11

bicycle, with the same astounding drive, energy and will to help people overcome obstacles.

The Central High/Temple University product thought long and deep in the solitude that followed Bowser's death, and kept coming back to one question: How could Bowser best be remembered? The answer came one busy workday, while Sylvester pedaled from World Gym (20th & Sansom) to the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, where he volunteers in geriatrics.

"Kevin was leaving his mark on our community, and I always wanted to ride my bike across the United States," Sylvester says. "It just hit me. I'd ride for

Kevin, to continue his mission with kids and his community."

The Kevin Bowser Fund, administered by the University of Pennsylvania, was born. Months later, in the summer of 2002, there was a big biking 55 days and 3,000 miles across the country to launch his fund-raising trip with little media attention.

Largely through word of mouth, roughly \$100,000 was raised — unfortunately, it needed corporate backing to launch a scholarship fund. A day soon will start serving John Bartlett, a senior at college in Philadelphia. Bowser, a star at

Southwest Philly school. He returned home proud, yet feeling he needed to do more. Support was lukewarm, before and after. Which brings us to now.

On Jan. 17, he will tackle Tour d'Afrique 2004, an approximately 7,000-mile, 10-country, 120-day, life-changing odyssey. It will take him, with 32 others ranging in age from 19 to 62, on two wheels from Cairo, Egypt, to Cape Town, South Africa, through big-game reserves and over the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro.

He will pedal the perimeter of Botswana's Kalihari Desert and experience the biblical landscape of Ethiopia's Simian Mountains.

While the Tour's global mission is to promote human-powered transportation, AIDS awareness and a healthier environment, Sylvester's goals go beyond that: He is hopeful that his journey through Africa will hit home in his African-American community in more ways than just fund-raising in Bowser's name.

YOU CAN HELP

David Sylvester is seeking donations and corporate sponsorships in support of his upcoming bike trip. All proceeds will benefit the Kevin Bowser Scholarship Fund, which is administered by The Philadelphia Foundation.

Corporate sponsors can contact David at 267-252-1974, and individuals wishing to make tax-deductible donations toward the scholarship fund can do so online at <http://www.contribute2.org>, or by mail to the Kevin Bowser Scholarship Fund, c/o The Philadelphia Foundation, 1234 Market St., Suite 1800, Philadelphia, Pa., 19107.

"I'm doing it because Kevin meant that much to me and his family was very instrumental in making me who I am today," Sylvester says. "I'm also trying to show kids and everybody that whatever it is you want to do, if you put your mind to it, you can do it. That's what Kevin was about. I want kids in our community to realize that the world's bigger than your block or your hood in Philly. I thought I knew a lot about the United States and geography, but the trip across the country absolutely blew my mind ... It made me realize that, for all the things that are screwed up in this nation, it's a huge, beautiful America out there. And I just want kids to understand that not only can they do it, no matter their station in life, but that they can come back to something and make it better."

Ask Sylvester about the massive undertaking and preparation for such a journey, and he chuckles. He will be among strangers in a foreign land, battling blazing temperatures, and warding off diarrhea and viruses

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