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## Creating an Inclusive Culture in Cycling: The Story of Spoke Folx

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**CHUCK**

Hi, I'm Chuck Tookey. I live in Bellingham and I love Bikes. I believe that bikes are for everyone. I wanted to meet other people who felt the same way, so I set out to find them.

It wasn't hard to do.

The joys and benefits of cycling are worth sharing, but it's no secret that mainstream cycling in the United States has been dominated by white men since its inception in the 1800s.

In Bellingham though, there are a number of groups working to create more inclusive spaces in cycling. Many of these organizers realized that the social environments they were searching for were pretty nonexistent in the cycling world, and then they took it upon them selves to create the communities that they wanted to share their love of biking with.

One of these groups, Spoke Folx, is dedicated to making a space in cycling for Women, Trans, Femme, non-binary and gender non-conforming people. They meet on the first Tuesday of every month for some fresh cooked breakfast in the park. The organizers of this group, Rza and Ashley, were generous enough to take time to meet with me and to record audio at one of their Tuesday morning meetings. Here is their story of creating a welcoming community centered around the bicycle.

**RZA**

my name is Rza. And I organize spoke folx

**ASH**

My name is Ashley Fejeran and I'm co founder of spoke folx.

**ASH**

Yeah, I had to text my mom to ask her when I got my first bike

**RZA**

so I have a terrible memory. So I don't remember learning to ride and how old I was and I didn't text my mom I should have. But, you know, despite the fact that I grew up in rural Kentucky in the middle of nowhere I have lots of memories of riding a bike as a kid and in fact spent most of third grade you know, in a sling for a broken collarbone my first cyclist injury so although I don't know the specifics, I grew up riding in the country gravel roads, just out and back to the highway from my house, waving at neighbors my like little dog running along, you know, with me, and so I learned how to ride at a young age.

**ASH**

Growing up I lived out in the valley, in the country. And we had this really long driveway and it was just like my dad pushing me until he was like, I'm not touching and I was like, all right, I'm riding a bike!

**ASH**

And I was probably barefoot against all advice of my parents because I hated wearing shoes. Yeah, I just you know that memory of, it's like that you can hear really specifically, that sound of like, tires, crunching on the gravel. That's what's in my mind, and it probably was like late summer, it was beautiful.

**ASH/RZA**

31:04 - Despite growing up on like, opposite sides of the country our like learning memories are so similar. Really? Oh, that's wonderful. We've never talked about that. That's really cool. Yeah, I forget we both grew up in the country. Yeah, we did.

## **CHUCK**

One of the greatest things about bikes is that they give people a chance to reconnect with all those things kids do but adults often forget. Hopping on a bike and riding on a beautiful day can make an adult feel like a kid again. Even if someone learns to ride later in life, the sensation of cruising down a hill with the sun on their skin and the wind in their face can bring a sense of youthful joy.

Another great thing about bikes is that they are extremely practical, especially in Bellingham. Being able to move around the city on your own schedule is a good feeling of independence and autonomy. Now, an car can provide this independence as well, but the joys of riding a bike are very different than those of driving a car.

## **RZA**

You know, when I'm commuting on my bike I can short cut through the park. You can't do that in a car, right. So it also enables me to get closer to all the other living creatures surrounding me, to be able to take fun ways to get places, you know, commuting doesn't just have to be a to and from chore, it can be part of the experience as well.

## **Chuck**

Due to the common associations of bike commuting with high levels of risk, it might be odd to hear someone say that, in addition to being fun, biking makes them feel safe. But, Ashley and Rza both expressed that biking gives them a sense of safety. When they say this, they are referring to the freedom and autonomy that their bikes provide. With their bikes, they can leave anytime and go anywhere.

## **ASH**

biking is something that has been important to me not just as a form of transportation but as a way to find and build community and to have independence and freedom and safety. It's a thing that makes me feel really safe, when I have my bike I can get myself anywhere I need to go.

## **Chuck**

Rza shares those feelings

## **RZA**

I do it more because of the autonomy and freedom that it gives me to be able to get anywhere at any time, leave at any moment, have control over my schedule

## **Chuck**

There is more to their love of cycling though

## **RZA**

Its more about being challenged when I'm on the bike, you know physically and mentally, you know and then being able to come through that. Right? And be like: you know what today was a really hard day there were certain times on this gravel ride that I wasn't having fun, and I also didn't eat enough snacks and I got hangry and had to have a sit down, but I did it.

**CHUCK**

Unfortunately, despite all these positive associations that Rza and Ashley have with the bicycle, it's not all sunny country roads and good times with their pals.

There are a number of negative experiences they have had while interacting with other bikers. They have often felt unwelcome and uncomfortable at bike shops, on group rides, and in casual interactions with other people within the bike community. And who are these cyclists? They are cisgender white men. Cisgender means that the gender a person associates with matches the sex that they were assigned at birth. Cisgender is the opposite of transgender. Now, this isn't to say that all cisgender white male cyclists are bad. But, we, and I say we because I'm a cisgender white man who works in a bike shop, we have a bad rep.

So, what types of cisgender white male behavior make others feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in cycling?

**RZA**

Dear Lord, where to start?

**Chuck**

Rza shared that there frequently is a lack of respect for women ride leaders

**RZA**

I heard men giving her unsolicited advice once about the route, suggesting that she change it, and the second time about how to take a picture on her camera.

**RZA**

Male riders keep sprinting out in front of the woman leader constantly, even though they have no idea where the ride is going.

**CHUCK**

In bike shops, Ashley has regularly been treated as if she has no idea of what she is doing despite her years of cycling experience. Once she was trying to use a shop's public pump, which happened to be broken.

**ASH**

So I go back in and I'm like, I think that this is broken, like it's not working. And they're like, well, you're, you know, you're probably just not doing it right here. I'll come show you so he comes out and then he's like, Oh, I think it's broken. And I was like... yeah, man. And the worst part about that is, I immediately second guessed my own knowledge.

**Chuck**

Another time, she needed to use the communal bike stand at a University's bike shop and was doubted again.

**ASH**

The first guy was like, oh, what do you mean? Are you sure? I mean, you want to take your Then like, three minutes later, second guy comes up, and he's like, Oh, what are you doing? I was like, I'm just taking all this stuff off my bike. He was like, well sure you want to take off your fenders? Like, it's like, it's like September and I was like, yep. Because I'm going to do a cross race.

**Chuck**

Rza and Ashley shared multiple experiences of men treating them and other women with disrespect and an underlying doubt of their knowledge. In addition to this, Rza shared another common problem that women face in a co-ed cycling group setting.

**RZA**

I've also been out on recurring social group rides, where every time a new woman shows up, she's overrun with attention from men in this really predatory and hyper sexualized way.

**Chuck**

No wonder they they wanted to create their own space.

**RZA**

It's very off putting, not just for that person, in a lot of cases, as they've confirmed to me, but you know, for all the other like women in the group to watch.

**ASH**

It's so easy to just be totally turned off and just like, give up. I mean, I don't know. It's my main feeling around stuff like that is just like of defeat and anger.

Those experiences of not being listened to or of having your knowledge be dismissed. Like, that's not unique to cycling.

It was not hard to immediately come up with a bunch of examples of times where I had a really bad experience.

**CHUCK**

It is important to note that Rza and Ashley recognize that there are other much more threatening forms of discrimination out there

**ASH**

A lot of other people have experienced much more scary and dangerous discrimination.

**CHUCK**

But that doesn't invalidate the negative experiences they've had.

**CHUCK**

Rza and Ashley found a better cycling environment at the WTF bikexplorers summit in Oregon last summer, and that version of WTF stands for women, trans, and femme. And about 150 people attended the summit. The WTF Bikexplorer's website describes the summit as an event

with multiple “sessions and workshops that focus on the bicycle as a vehicle for justice and healing”. Additionally, the participants have “the opportunity to connect, learn from, and ride with like-minded women, trans, non-binary, and femme bikexploring cyclists”. A ticket to the summit included lodging, meals, and free swag.

**RZA**

I actually had a ticket to the like, inaugural summit in Montana, but then got stressed out about, like, the cost of the travel and all that stuff and sold it.

**CHUCK**

Rza had a friend who still went to that inaugural summit though, and returned with rave reviews.

**RZA**

she was like, it was just, I would just go to meet all the cool people. She's like, it was just the coolest group of people, you know, from all over the country, different types of biking.

**CHUCK**

Rza and Ashley still hadn't met, but Ashley had also caught wind of the summit. So, when the event for 2019 was scheduled close by in Oregon, they both made sure to get tickets.

**RZA**

Cool, this is awesome opportunity to go meet some cool people do some like personal learning for myself, you know, and honestly have it just fun kind of weekend.

**CHUCK**

They were excited to be in a new environment and to be learning from people that are largely left out of the mainstream cycling scene in the United States.

**ASH**

That was definitely at a time when I was like, ok, this is going to be a great opportunity for me to learn how to do a lot of like, you know bike handling, meal, some of the other things that were like cooking and shopping for backpacking trips, which was really great. And then also like, cycling for healing and self care. And yeah, talking about the cycling industry and toxic masculinity and so that was very interesting and exciting to me. To be able to do that, to learn from folks who weren't just like dudes in a bike shop. That's how I had learned a lot of things. And I was interested in like learning from other people and hearing other perspectives.

**CHUCK**

And then eventually, Rza and Ashley met during a meal in between all the workshops.

**RZA**

And then we just ended up at a table together at a meal, right?

**ASH**

And I think like we did kind of talk but we actually like connected a lot more after we got back. I mean it was also busy at the summit.

**RZA**

Yeah we just both learned each other lived in Bellingham and we were like cool lets follow up after the summit. We were both there with other friends too and it was later on.

### **Chuck**

They wanted to replicate the environment they found at the WTF Bikexplorers summit here in Bellingham. They got to work shortly after their return.

### **ASH**

Gaahh, I just know what this feels like now and it's great. And so we did meet up and we went on a ride. And we were just both talking about that. And we were like, man, I really wish we could have this replicate that feeling You know, that community that we found at the summit here. And then I think we literally were just like, let's just do it. Like, okay, great.

### **RZA**

We got together. And we did some water coloring. Oh, yeah. Yeah, we drank a beer and we did some water coloring. And we tried to come up with a name for this group.

### **RZA**

And so recently decided on Spoke Folx, and I like it on a lot of levels.

### **RZA**

Part of it's like the metaphor, which I think is really important to both of us, you know, there you can't have a single spoke on a running bicycle, right. A really strong wheel, it's gonna have at least 32 you know what I'm saying? It gets down to that like centerpiece idea of, you know, none of us can do this alone. And at its heart Spoke Folx is about the community and the things we do together and the ways we work together. Right and the places we can go together. And so that made my heart very happy to come up with that plus just has a nice ring to it.

### **Chuck**

Spoke Folx has a broader mission too.

### **ASH**

We are about hanging out and having fun, but we're also about social justice and advocacy in the biking, cycling world and for marginalized communities in general.

### **RZA**

You know, I specifically want to make space for, you know, trans fem women, non binary folks in cycling, because the industry and like mainstream cycling community has just proven that they're not going to.

The boys club cycling isn't going to change their behavior, and welcome a broader community in until we like, sort of show up and force our way.

But, our goal is to create a space where slightly less harm is done, hopefully, dramatically less, let's get real, and where we can all gain more confidence, you know, exercise joy, and have like a bigger impact, like long term.

### **SPOKE FOLX PARTICIPANT**

We get to be really transparent about how bikes make us feel and I think that's not something I get to talk about with men necessarily. And I think that it's a good place, its just safe. It feels

safe and it feels like a community and more than anything I really thrive in the community of cycling. And I think that it's a way to get outside and be together and support one another and its not a competition as much as it's a time to be together and laugh and cry and share anything and everything.

## **CHUCK**

The psychiatrist Peter Breggin defines love as a joyful awareness. When pedaling a bicycle, a rider must be aware of their surroundings, aware of their body, and aware of the bike between their legs.

Sure, surroundings aren't always beautiful, legs and lungs burn, and bikes have mechanical issues. But the awareness required while cycling makes finding joy in surroundings, body, and bike easy when it all lines up. I think it is this joyful awareness that many people experience while cycling that helps explain why so many people love bikes.

## **PERSON 1**

Nothing makes me happier than riding my bike, so.

## **PERSON 2**

You move, you expend energy, which is a good thing, you know you're in motion, and being in motion is probably one of the key secrets to staying well and alive.

## **PERSON 3**

The bike has been my life, my livelihood, my, I mean I, I say it's like this really cool place that it's an input of your stress and your energy. And it's, it's my therapy and it's my, in a way it's my everything.

## **PERSON 4**

But I've also found through biking found a lot of joy in terms of the people I know and the activity itself. I feel like a kid again which is awesome. And as I mentioned before there is a lot of value in building confidence in yourself and I want everyone to be able to experience that.

## **PERSON 2**

The one variable on happiness that is probably the most persistent and powerful beyond having food in your stomach a roof over your head and some security, I recognize all that, is doing something for somebody or doing something with another person and I think the biking community really opens a lot of opportunities for that.

## **PERSON 1**

My favorite thing was to like go ride around the block with my friends.

## **PERSON 5**

And I guess I'm looking forward to riding my bike after this. And that's an open invite, if anyone's available, I don't know the plan but I'm riding all morning.

## **PERSON 4**

We all share this like one love of two wheels.

## **PERSON 3**

That was a sick ride, yea that was a sick ride! We should do that every day, the world would be a better place.

## **PERSON 4**

Heck yeah, just did that! Sometimes you don't do something for a long time and then that one day you're like, ok, I think I can do it, I think I can do it, and then you do it and you feel amazing.

## **ASH**

Yeah it was really fun, it was really fun, it was a really fun, riding with those people was a great way to get into cycling because it was just so much fun, hanging out with friends and the easiest way to get around and do anything.



## **CHUCK**

This love of cycling and the desire to share it has motivated Rza, Ashley, and many other people to create spaces that are welcoming to a wider variety of bike riders.

This movement is gaining momentum, in Bellingham alone there are multiple groups dedicated to making inviting spaces for a variety of cyclists.

Groups like Shifting Gears, a non-profit that organizes recreation experiences for women, trans, femme, and non-binary people

The Vamos Outdoors Project, a program that provides environmental education opportunities for Latinx and English language learning youth.

The Bellingham POWER Program, a middle school bike commuting program for girl, trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming students.

Those are just to name a few.

Thanks to all the groups out there like Spoke Folx that are committed to ensuring that more people get to enjoy the benefits of cycling, I think that bikes have a bright future. There is definitely still a lot of work to be done when it comes to making cycling easily accessible for more people. Many significant barriers to entry exist in cycling, such as the cost of gear and the safe space and time needed to learn how to ride. Additionally, this podcast focused largely on the gender gap in cycling in the United States. There is also a racial gap. If you're interested in these topics, I highly recommend checking out the book "Bike Lanes are White Lanes: Bicycle Advocacy and Urban Planning" by Melody Hoffmann.

All that being said, the work that is currently being done by organizations around Bellingham, and the world, gives me a lot of hope because I think we are heading in the right direction.

So to all my bike riders out there, pedal on my friends. I look forward to giving you a wave next time I see you on the street or trail. It's up to all of us to create a more inclusive culture, so let's get to work and make the joys of riding a bike something that everyone can have the chance to experience.

## **CHUCK**

I need to say thank you to a lot of people who helped make this podcast happen.

First off, a huge one to Rza and Ashley, for sharing their stories with me and recording audio themselves for this podcast, and for making time in their schedules to do so.

I also need to thank Warren Cornwall, my advisor throughout this whole process. Warren, thanks for keeping me on track.

A huge thank you to Ana Jager, the organizer of the POWER program. She put me in touch with Rza and Ashley initially.

And I need to thank everyone that I interviewed during the making of this podcast because the conversations we had really helped me think things through and gave me an idea of the direction I wanted to go.

Katy Heriford and Charlie Sylvester from Shifting gears both shared over an hour of their time with me.

Ted King, we got to talk on a ferry. He has a podcast, King of the Ride, check it out.

A thank you to Lelan Dains, who I got to talk with on the phone. He was all the way out in Emporia, Kansas. He's an organizer of the Dirty Kanza gravel race.

Another thank you to Chris Carter, who I talked to early on and runs a great blog, [shredonomics.com](http://shredonomics.com), check it out.

And thank you to Angi Weston from Radical Roots, who you should reach out to if you are wondering about how to get involved in the bike industry as a woman, here is her contact info (

### **ANGI**

I Angie Weston solemnly swear if you have a question on how you can get in the bike industry or further your career in the industry you can personally reach out to me, [angi.weston@radicalrootsmtb.com](mailto:angi.weston@radicalrootsmtb.com), that's A N G I, no E, dot Weston, W E S T O N at [radicalrootsmtb.com](http://radicalrootsmtb.com). Shoot me a message, I will do all I can.

### **CHUCK**

And thank you to Jake Rinn, who designed the poster for this podcast and who helped me get some really great gravel sound effects.

And a huge thank you to my other neighbors, Skylar Tibbets and Serafima Healy, for playing the beautiful music that appeared in this story. Give their band a listen, The Mary Anns, you'll find them on Spotify.

And of course, gotta thank my parents, who got me on a bike early, taught me to ride, and inspire me continue pedaling.

And thank you to everyone at Fairhaven Bicycles, for teaching me so much and for being the best coworkers I could possibly ask for.

And thank you to all the friends that I am lucky enough to get to ride with and who make bikes way more fun, you know who you are.

Much love y'all!

This is Chuck Tookey, signing off, over and out.