

Reflections on a grassroots movement at the dawn of Black Lives Matter

From Grassroots

Free breakfast is revolutionary. The Black Panther Party understood that. Vibrant minds are nourished by healthy, well-fed bodies. Healthy individuals build healthy communities, and healthy communities are empowered communities. The same kind of thinking inspired the genesis of Red, Bike and Green (more commonly known as RBG) - a grassroots organization that promotes bike riding as a way to encourage healthy living within the Black community. The goal was to cultivate a culture of healthy living, by making bike riding more widely accepted among Black Americans.

In 2008, I founded Red, Bike and Green in the bike-friendly Bay Area, where biking advocates, mostly comprised of white cycling enthusiasts, were eager to “diversify” their biking constituency but lacked the tools and cultural capital to bridge the gap. It seemed as if, for the mainstream bicycling world, the diversity conundrum became a question of culture and relativity. To be clear, diversifying bicycling was not RBG’s primary objective. Our awareness as black organizers called us to prioritize other pressing needs in our community that, in our eyes, outweighed the goals of our non-black counterparts. Even though we were excited about biking, our goal was to use bikes as a means to achieve healthier black communities.

Shortly after establishing a purpose, our mission statement was crafted. We strove to be clear about our intention as a group. It seemed natural to mirror the influence the Black Power movement had on our work. As an homage, the mission was modeled after the Black Panthers’ 10-point plan. RBG’s aesthetic struck a chord with

Black people. Our colors, red, black and green were in reference to those of Pan-Africanism, a movement led by Marcus Garvey. Our promotional materials were adorned with symbols of African heritage and archival images of historical moments of blackness and nostalgia. Our approach was intended to reflect the thinking of historical Black revolutionaries that sought to uplift black communities by promoting self-determination and empowerment.

RBG raised eyebrows from the start. The method of organizing was to lead groups of black cyclists on community bike rides through black neighborhoods. The idea was to create a sense of camaraderie, motivation and normalcy around biking. Our rides were exclusively Black and many of our contemporaries questioned our tactics. At the time, we were a group of urban cyclists that did not look like your traditional bike riding commuter or elite cyclist. While many people were excited to see new representation in the cycling world, the group began to garner its fair share of detractors. Surprisingly, much of the criticism came from within the Black community and its allies.

Black ridership was nothing new to the bicycling world. A class of dedicated and experienced black cycling enthusiasts has had roots in the black elite for decades.

These cyclists easily spend thousands of dollars on top of the line road bikes and cycling gear. Cold weekends during the off-season are often times spent on the ski slopes to keep their muscles active. This was not RBG's aspiration. RBG's mission outlined a plan to use an alternative approach to integrate bike culture into mainstream black culture. It should come as no surprise, that we immediately came under the scrutiny of these black cycling institutions. Another group of critics was a bit more

vocal. While the idea of creating a safe space specifically for black people to explore the benefits of bike riding was clear, these detractors saw the exclusivity as divisive and problematic.

Between the two camps of criticism, our unorthodox ways resulted in controversial descriptors, such as anarchist and radical. Labels carry weight and it was becoming clear that RBG was becoming more than statement of healthy living in the black community. In retrospect, it makes sense; one cannot address the state of health of a vulnerable population without addressing all the factors of being which impact the well-being of that population. Besides, we had already asserted ourselves as revolutionary-minded individuals who wanted to see radical change. With change, comes discomfort, and an effort as simple as a bike ride – or a free breakfast – has the potential to elicit a strong response.

Supporters of RBG rose to our defense. The community rides were sacred safe spaces for a people with a shared experience to show up for each other and ride a bike, for the sake of each other's health. The controversy had galvanized a movement among our riders. It was clear that we created something that our community had received as necessary in ways that went beyond bike riding.

To Grassroots Movement

Red, Bike and Green continued to attract more attention with each season. We were frequently called for interviews, quotes and opinions. Publications such as Momentum magazine and The Atlantic referenced our work in their commentary on cycling and equity. The word spread about our work via the press and social networking. Incoming

emails from bike advocates, artists, business people and elected officials illustrated the excitement that we were generating. All of them saw RBG as a niche and recognized our potential to do something truly unique.

As excitement grew, our bike group, which was intended to be a local grassroots effort, was thrust onto the national stage as the new powerhouse on cycling and urban Blackness. We presented at conferences and spoke on panels about the impact of our work. Organizations such as, the League of American Bicyclists, California Bicycle Coalition and Bike East Bay sought representation from our ranks. At times it seemed as if RBG was portrayed as the answer to the bike community's diversity question.

While this was a role that we did not sign up for, the need for black voices in the cycling arena made us hesitant to ignore the call to represent our ridership.

On the opposite end, many of our black contemporaries considered us bike gurus.

Keep in mind that we were bike novices ourselves - just excited to see more physical activity in the black community. Nonetheless, we quickly became a trusted source of expertise, as venturing into the world of cycling has a reputation of being an intimidating process.

By 2010, RBG had chapters in New York, Atlanta, and Chicago. The following year we would open chapters in Milwaukee and Indianapolis. Conversations with potential leadership in places like London, New Orleans, and - shortly after the killing of Michael Brown - Ferguson, Missouri, led us to hope that RBG was coming of age at the very moment black communities needed a space to foster a movement.

The uprising in Ferguson, Missouri took place in a climate where black communities in urban centers across the nation were witnessing a loss of place at the hands of

gentrification. Displacement has a history of being unkind to populations of color, and in the Bay Area the black community has a track record of being its first casualty.

Neighborhoods in Oakland were becoming increasingly bike friendly. Long-time black residents viewed bike culture with suspicion. Unsolicited changes meant that accommodations were being made for wealthy new bike-riding residents, who will ultimately replace the denizens of historical black neighborhoods. New bike lanes were said to be the first indicator of displacement, thus given the moniker “white stripes of gentrification” (Mirk, 2009)

The tension put RBG in precarious position. Bicycling was becoming the canary of displacement and our job was to convince the black community to embrace it.

Nonetheless, our commitment to promoting bicycling as a means to build health black communities remained clear. We could not ignore the fact that bike riding was the scapegoat for these changes that were having a negative impact on the vitality of black neighborhoods. We moved with caution through uneasy waters. The mission was unchanged, but our work had transformed to reflect what it currently meant to promote healthy living among black people. Our rhetoric evolved from highlights about preventable chronic illnesses and sedentary lifestyles, to outcries of police brutality and the politicization of black bodies in public spaces. It was evident that discussing long-term health without addressing short-term survival was not an option. We could not advocate for healthy thriving communities, when the community in question is already disenfranchised.

To Movement

In August 2014, RBG staged Tour de Town –an Oakland-based, citywide bike tour that called on all black cyclists to take to the streets as an action to the effect of Black Lives Matter. Two hundred and fifty black bicyclists rode the course of a twenty-mile route from West Oakland to East Oakland. The ride not only embodied the tenets of RBG’s mission, but it provided our riders the much needed space to gather, heal and celebrate life. This event took place shortly after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, as the Black Lives Matter response was quickly picking up momentum. Tour de Town was disruptive and peaceful. Much like a protest, it called attention to the Black American experience of survival in public spaces. Much like any other RBG community ride, it invited Black Americans to assert their humanity in public spaces. The learning that came from witnessing the evolution of Red, Bike and Green from a small grassroots group to a powerful element within a national movement, is that the human experience within a social context cannot be dissociated from our understanding of health and well-being. Red, Bike, and Green only represents one aspect of this complex reality. In order to see lasting change within a healthier population we must incorporate an interdisciplinary approach to our analysis.

References

Mirk, S. (2009, November 19). Bicycle Race: Nonprofit Investigates the Portland Bike Scene's Racial Gap. *The Portland Mercury*, p. 1. Retrieved December 1, 2015, from <http://www.portlandmercury.com/portland/bicycle-race/Content?oid=1854486>