



BUILDING A BETTER NEIGHBORHOOD: OAK CITY CYCLING PROJECT

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QBP's mission is to get Every Butt on a Bike. It's why we do what we do, and it's something many bike shops have adopted as well. For this three-part Call Up series, we thought we'd take a closer look at some shops that are working hard to make a difference in their communities and expand ridership. In the final installment, we talk to Oak City Cycling Project in Raleigh, NC.

[Read part one of this series featuring Chocolate Spokes.](#)

[Read part two of this series featuring Gladys Bikes.](#)

In parts one and two of this series, we've talked about shops that are making a difference in their underserved communities. Both Chocolate Spokes and Gladys have done a stand-up job increasing ridership and building their communities while navigating the challenges of gentrification in the process. But what about shops that aren't necessarily in underserved neighborhoods? What about shops that are in a bustling downtown neighborhood surrounded by Victorian-style mansions and a lot of other bike shops? How can they improve an already thriving community and carve a niche for themselves?

Oak City Cycling Project seems to have figured out how. Co-Owner Jared Harber and crew go above and beyond to build ridership (and the success of their business) in their busy Raleigh, NC neighborhood.



What's In A Neighborhood?

Located on the boarder of the Oakwood and Mordecai neighborhoods in downtown Raleigh, Oak City is surrounded by history. Oakwood is the only nineteenth century neighborhood that's still intact in Raleigh. The Victorian-style homes have all been painstakingly restored and the spacious backyards are covered with beautiful landscaping and lush gardens. While Oakwood's history is that of a residential hub, Mordecai's is more based around agriculture. Despite now being very much part of Raleigh's downtown grid, at one point it wasn't even considered within city limits — the bulk of the land being owned by a single plantation owner. Over time, the plantation was parceled off, and now more closely resembles the surrounding residential neighborhoods.

Today, Oak City Cycling Project sits right between these two neighborhoods in a non-descript garage space.

Encouraging people to get out and ride while seeing the cycling community grow makes you feel pretty great at the end of the day. We try to make cycling seem fun and exciting while creating an open, accepting, and inclusive space that gets people hyped on riding a bike.

Starting Small... Really Small

Oak City started small. We're talking crammed in a backyard between a shed and chicken coop small. After about six months, it moved to a shared warehouse space. It had the advantage of being indoors, but it wasn't much bigger than the backyard space.

"I think my bedroom was bigger than the shop at that time," says Harber. "We only sold used bikes that we fixed up and serviced a few friends' bikes. Eventually, we got the space we're in now. It's an underground garage with no air conditioning, one window, no parking, and really no street visibility."

By remaining a small shop, Oak City is able to better connect with and grow its community of riders. While the shop now successfully sells a full portfolio of great bike brands and accessories — including Surly, Salsa, and All-City — the early days of the shop weren't without their challenges.

"None of us had ever owned a business before," says Harber. "That gave us some challenges, as did being a new bike shop in close proximity to approximately thirty other very established shops. We were really trying to figure out how to set ourselves apart. We felt there was a lot of riding possibilities in the Raleigh area, and that, while many shops were doing great work, there was a lot of riding styles that just weren't being catered to in the area."

At the time Oak City opened, the Raleigh cycling scene was largely dominated by road and mountain bike riding. As such, those were the types of riding that many shops catered to, leaving things like gravel, commuting, and touring behind. This was where Oak City decided to set its focus. Judging by the shop's growing success, it's clear there was a market for those types of riding around Raleigh.



Growing A Community

In addition to growing cycling movements around the Raleigh area, the crew at Oak City do as much to benefit the community as they possible can. In any given month of the year, there are no less than fifteen group rides and events on the shop calendar. Everything from maintenance classes to overnight bikepacking trips to Saturday morning road rides are offered, so no matter what your interests, Oak City has you covered.

"We like to give back and help grow cycling in our area beyond selling and servicing bikes," says Harber. "We work with our city on infrastructure development that makes cycling in and around Raleigh more accessible. We help several non-profits in our city on an annual basis. And our on-going bike challenges encourage riders of all levels to push their limits and explore local routes. One example is that we're about to introduce a map of local mountain bike trails as part of a challenge. The plan is we'll stamp off trails on the map as riders complete them. When you finish the map, you get a nifty patch."

That map is being released in support of Raleigh's local trail building and lobbying group TORC (Triangle Off Road Cyclists). Collaboration is another attribute that sets Oak City apart.

"We love to collaborate! We often join forces with other shops for various rides and events and we also work closely with local advocacy groups like Oaks and Spokes. One of our employees is even on the Oaks and Spokes board."

Other events that pepper the Oak City calendar include BYO Log rides (where riders each bring a single log of wood on a ride that eventually ends in a bon fire), Third Thursday Cruiser rides, and Coffee Outside rides. Additionally, FTW (Femme, Trans, Women's) clinics in mountain bike skills, bikepacking, and gravel all make up a good chunk of the events as well.

"Community building starts in the shop by creating a strong in-shop presence and an incentive to help grow and work with outside-the-shop communities," says Harber. "If people are consistently interacting with one another at your events, there's a high likelihood that connection will grow to outside your events as well.

"All three of our owners are mechanics, sales people, and outreach coordinators. This is what we do: the whole package! A lot of shops have owners or salaried managers that are somewhat hands off when it comes to outside-the-shop operations. I feel like community connection is then left up to employees. If a shop owner wants to see more community growth with their shop, they should encourage salaried employees to take up such tasks. Or, do it themselves."

The Family That Rides Together...

Those partnership efforts have certainly paid off for Oak City, as well as the Raleigh cycling community as a whole. Business is good for the shop, events and group rides are full of riders of all experience levels and cycling in the city has grown well beyond just road riding and mountain biking. Harber chalks all this up to one simple thing that Oak City prides itself on: treating the cycling community more like a family.

"We try to make cycling seem fun and exciting while creating an open, accepting, and inclusive space that gets people hyped on riding a bike," he says. "We support all types of riders from all levels, interests, and backgrounds. We see the cycling community, the network of people who ride, and even other bike shops as one big family — a cooperative of people trying to achieve the same goal, as opposed to competition or niche groups. Encouraging people to get out and ride while seeing the cycling community grow makes you feel pretty great at the end of the day."

As Raleigh continues to grow and become more bike-friendly, Jared and the Oak City crew plan to be right there growing with it — but not too much.

"Our goal is to remain a small, neighborhood shop that supports our community," he says. "Of course, we can always use a little more room to grow — both literally and figuratively. There is a reason why the word 'project' is in our name: we want to be reminded that change is inevitable, and we want to embrace it and growth with it. We want to continue to do things that set us apart. We never want to settle on what we are doing."

As for what future growth means in the literal sense?

"In five years, maybe a new space that has AC and parking. In ten, a larger staff with some days off and larger employee incentives like extended vacations and ride opportunities. In twenty? Whew, taking a nap with a stack of Pringles on my chest."

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