

BUILDING A BETTER NEIGHBORHOOD: CHOCOLATE SPOKES

May 2018 // Business Building // Exploring the Industry

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. First up, Chocolate Spokes in Denver, Colorado. Check back next week for part two.

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

[Read part three of this series featuring Oak City Cycling Project.](#)

Imagine, for a moment, that you're walking around your neighborhood and happen upon a crumbling shell of a building. There's graffiti, all the windows are busted out, and the little that remains of the roof is caving in on itself. Living in the neighborhood, you've watched this building fall further and further into disrepair and have heard rumors that it's a crack den. You look at it. What do you see?

If you're Gregory Crichlow, you see an opportunity — a chance to make a difference in your neighborhood and encourage a future of biking for the community. You see Chocolate Spokes — a bike shop and custom frame builder in the heart of Denver's Five Points neighborhood.



Getting Things Started

Five Points has had a tumultuous history, to say the least. As one of the city's oldest neighborhoods, it was home to Denver's elite class during the late 19th century. Around the same time those wealthy residents began to move to the more popular Capitol Hill neighborhood, Denver's discriminatory housing laws were put in place. These laws heavily prevented homes in many of the neighborhoods surrounding Five Points from being sold to black Americans and other people of color. As a result, Five Points became a predominantly African-American community that operated like a city within a city. The main drag of Welton Street was lined with every business people could ever need. A vibrant art and music scene regularly saw the likes of Billie Holiday, Count Basie, and Nat King Cole perform in its many jazz clubs. It became known as the Harlem of the West and, while its residents weren't necessarily all there by choice but rather because of racist, unjust laws, they thrived nonetheless.

When the systematic housing discrimination ended, residents that could slowly began moving on to more popular neighborhoods, leaving Five Points to battle poverty, crime, drug use, and a growing number of abandoned, deteriorating buildings. Its once-booming economy collapsed, and those that remained were left to pick up the pieces. Several decades later, Crichlow came along and did just that.

Crichlow opened Chocolate Spokes in 2011 after his first career as an architect was hit hard by the recession. Originally only intending to occupy a small portion of the building for his frame building studio, he quickly realized that a service component to the shop was necessary to keep the lights on. So, working with the building's owner on a development and remodel plan, Crichlow got to work.

Since opening his doors in 2011, Crichlow has continued to go above and beyond to welcome everyone from Five Points into his shop, wearing a smile and his signature bow tie.

Things were slow to start. The people in the neighborhood weren't exactly lining up at the door. Actually, they were peeing on it. Crichlow says that when he first opened, he'd regularly walk up to someone relieving themselves on his newly realized dream. While a lot of business owners might reprimand or call the cops on those folks, Crichlow took a more human approach. He introduced himself and welcomed them to his bike shop.

"This building was abandoned for years, so I just had to help people understand that I was someone that wanted to invest in the neighborhood," he says. "The first day that I was open, I invited everyone that walked by into the shop to look around and see what was going on — that I had nothing to hide."

At a time when a lot of businesses had bars on their windows to prevent break-ins, Crichlow again took a different approach. He took all the bars off to send a message to the community — one of trust and a desire to be part of the neighborhood that he called home (in addition to owning a business in Five Points, Crichlow and his family also live there).

And guess what? That message was heard loud and clear.

Since opening his doors in 2011, Crichlow has continued to go above and beyond to welcome everyone from Five Points into his shop, wearing a smile and his signature bow tie. In the beginning, his clientele was mostly folks from the neighborhood happening by on secondhand bikes. They'd stop in for a quick tune-up or a flat fix and leave with memorable customer service experience that was sure to make them return. Chances are, they also left with one of the many made in the U.S.A, bean-to-bar chocolate bars that Crichlow stocks in the shop as well. Sometimes people just stop in to say hi and chat with Crichlow, without a bike. Over the years, his custom frame building side of the business has picked up but it's these everyday service-based transactions that have kept the lights on and the shop top of mind for many neighborhood residents.

As word spread, Crichlow grew to be a fixture of the community, affectionately known as "The Bike Guy" around the neighborhood. The shop has grown to the point of necessitating two additional employees, one of whom is a native Spanish speaker which helps them serve more of Five Point's diverse population. The neighborhood as a whole has begun to thrive again. In addition to Chocolate Spokes, a few other bike shops have opened as well as a whole slew of coffee shops, bars, and restaurants. The neighborhood is once again desirable. All of this sounds great, right? Sort of.

Along with that desirability has come higher rent prices and an overall higher cost of living. This has begun to push the original residents (and Crichlow's first customer base) out of the neighborhood, replacing them with the younger, trendier crowd that appreciates the proximity of Five Points to their downtown jobs. Lucky for Gregory, they also appreciate hand-built bicycles and nice chocolate. Still, this does put Crichlow in a bit of a conundrum. While he appreciates the community's newer residents — and the increased business they bring — he doesn't want to simply turn his back on those that got him to where he is today.

How does a business that started with the intention of reinvigorating a neighborhood now adapt to the gentrification that has come along with that revitalization? That's something that Crichlow struggles with every day— trying to strike a balance of servicing the neighborhood's newer residents while not turning his back on its core, previously underserved community.

His solution? Engaging the youth of the neighborhood.



A More Youthful Approach

As the frame building side of Crichlow's business has grown — thanks in part to Five Points' newer residents — and many local high schools have replaced shop classes with computer labs, he had a thought. He could help teach some of the skills that are no longer taught in school.

"There are so many young people around here trying to figure out their next step," he says. "If we can teach them a skillset, not only would that make our business more productive, but it would also further connect us to the community."

He says the goal of that initiative isn't to create a whole new group of bike builders or even to turn the kids into cyclists — though that would be nice. Rather, he's looking to show them that they can do something, give them confidence in their abilities. They can learn a skillset and not feel like they have to go to college for their education (and he's saying that as an adjunct professor at a university). He wants them to know that they do have options at their disposal. This initiative is still in its infancy, but Chocolate Spokes currently works with a local high school to offer an apprenticeship every spring.

For his part, Crichlow is reaching out to the younger generation in hopes of showing them that, while it's tough, those cycles of socioeconomic struggle can be broken.

Crichlow's five-year vision is to grow this to a much larger level and continue to show kids that they can break the cycles of socioeconomic struggle that many from the neighborhood are stuck in. For his part, Crichlow is reaching out to the younger generation in hopes of showing them that, while it's tough, things can be turned around — for individuals and neighborhoods alike.

"These cycles are really difficult to get out of," he says. "You see it happening at an early age. I've seen kids and they have this youth and energy that's just part of their being. As they get older, you start to see the skepticism seep in. To them, the doors are starting to close. You want to reach out and change that as much as you can."

From Petroleum to Pedestrian

One thing that's certainly on the upswing for Five Points is its bike infrastructure, which used to be in dire straits. If you look at the Five Points neighborhood on Google Maps now, you'll see a lot more bike lanes than you would've when Chocolate Spokes opened. You'll also notice that it still lacks when compared to the rest of the city. This is an issue that often plagues underserved communities — particularly those that are primarily communities of color — in cities all over the country.

In the years since opening his shop, Crichlow served a three-year term on the Denver Mayor's advisory board for biking where he was able to offer advice on bike infrastructure. This seemed to yield some results and Denver has since hired a multi-modal transportation expert to grow their cycling infrastructure further. Time will tell what impact that expert will have on Five Points, but Crichlow has already seen some changes occur.

"Denver is historically a very petroleum-based city," Crichlow says. "So a lot of the infrastructure we have is based around the petroleum lobby and is very car-based. In more recent times, the city has invested in trying to rediscover the value of being a pedestrian-friendly city."

Prior to increased cycling infrastructure, Denver's commuter light rail was extended through Five Points. Crichlow says that in the twenty or so years that it's been in the neighborhood, it's made Five Points much more walkable. As the neighborhood has become more walkable and, now more bikeable, it's also become much less economical for its previous residents. This creates a bit of a catch-22 for Crichlow but one thing he tells his customers is that because the neighborhood, and city at large, is more walkable and bike-friendly, it minimizes the need for a car. Though housing costs have gone up, with an investment in a reliable bike, some residents are able to balance the higher cost of living with a lower transportation cost.

The Profits of Giving Back

Chocolate Spokes isn't considered a "community bike shop" in the traditional sense. It doesn't have an open work bench to rent, it doesn't sell used bikes, and it doesn't have a non-profit status. It is very much for-profit and still needs to keep the lights on and pay its employees. However, Crichlow also has a vision for how to improve his neighborhood and the lives of those that inhabit it. His is one of the many shops that prove you can turn a profit while also giving back.

Now, imagine again that you're walking around your neighborhood and happen upon that crumbling shell of a building. What do you see?

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

[Check back soon for part three.](#)

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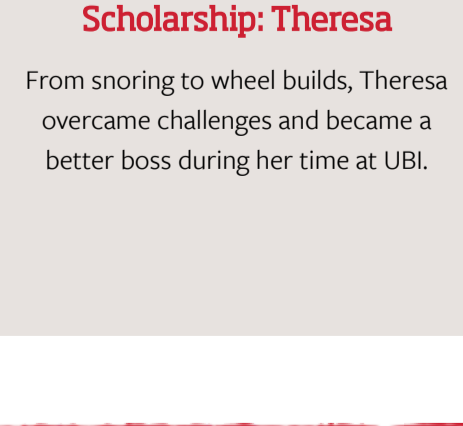


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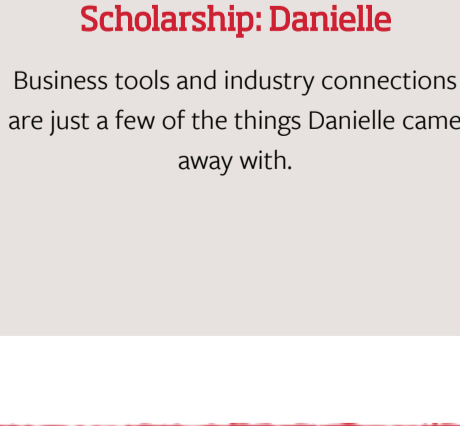
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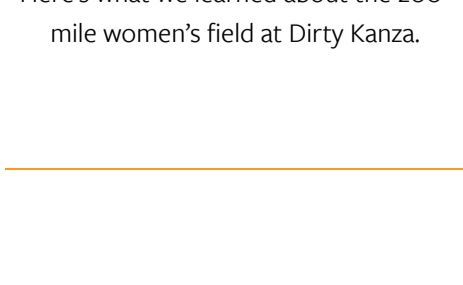
From snoring to wheel builds, Theresa overcame challenges and became a better boss during her time at UBI.



QBP Bike Mechanic Scholarship: Danielle

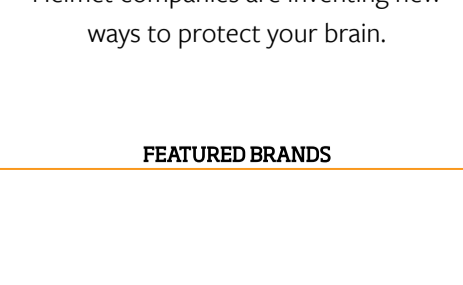
Business schools and industry connections are just a few of the things Danielle came away with.

This Month in Call Up



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Playing Defense: Advancing Helmet Technology

Helmet companies are inventing new ways to protect your brain.

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