

## BUILDING A BETTER NEIGHBORHOOD: GLADYS BIKES

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. This week, we talk to Gladys Bikes in Portland, OR. Check back next week for part three.**

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

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If you've perused a copy of Bicycle Retailer and Industry News or followed any cycling blogs over the past year or so, you've probably come across the name Leah Benson from Gladys Bikes in Portland, OR. You also might recognize her from her Londonderry Award win at SaddleDrive '17 or from her keynote speech at Quality Bicycle Products' Frostbike '18.

Whether you're familiar with Benson or not, one thing is certain: she is a force to be reckoned with and is taking massive strides towards making cycling more inclusive — both in her local Alberta Arts District neighborhood and within the industry at large.



### Streetcars to Street Gangs: A Neighborhood History

Gladys Bikes is located in the Albert Arts District in northeast Portland — a bustling hub of restaurants, stores, and art galleries. Much like the rest of the city, Alberta Arts is a thriving destination for many hipsters, trendsetters, and those adopting a counterculture-esque lifestyle. That wasn't always the case for the neighborhood though.

The history of the Alberta area bears striking similarities to the Five Points neighborhood (see part one of this series). It rose to prominence in the early 1900s when the streetcar system was put in place in Portland. The easy access to Portland's city center that the streetcar provided meant people could easily live in Alberta and commute to their jobs downtown. It grew the population immensely and caused the neighborhood to thrive.

Alberta thrived until the 1940s when Portland as a whole began experiencing significant changes. The biggest of these changes was the construction of Interstate Avenue. It quickly became the main transportation artery from Portland to Vancouver, WA, with many of the city's residents purchasing automobiles for the first time. As such, this increased dependency on cars drew a lot of pedestrian and streetcar traffic away from Alberta Avenue, drastically impacting its economy.

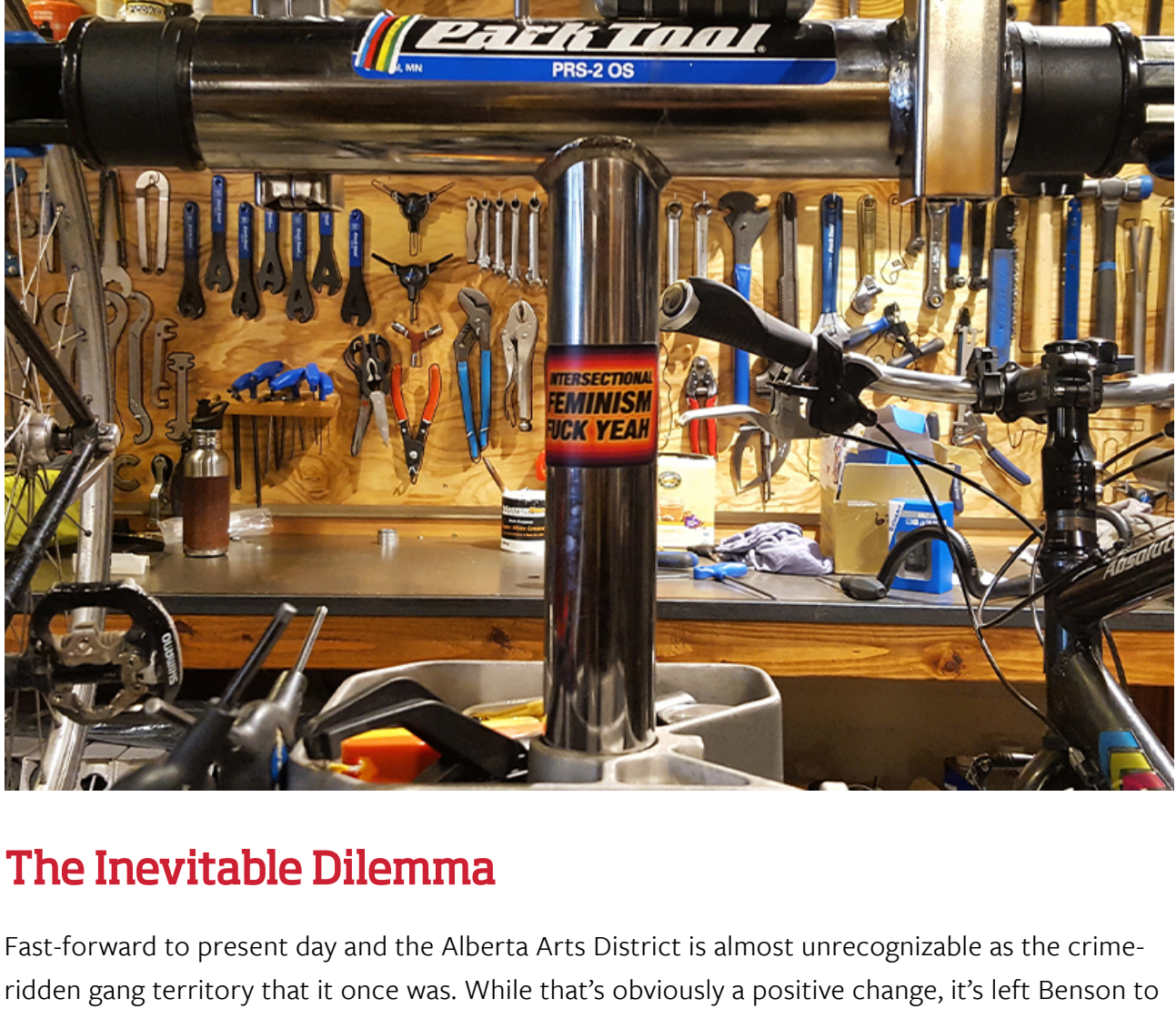
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The neighborhood's demographics began shifting as well. Originally, Alberta was made up of mostly Russian and German immigrants. As they began to move out due to the neighborhood's economic distress, many of North Portland's African-American and low-income families began moving in.

This was due to the 1948 Vanport Flood which destroyed many of those residents' homes and displaced them to Alberta.

The next few decades saw several publicly funded housing and transportation projects continue to displace low-income families. Without many other affordable options, these families often relocated to the Alberta neighborhood. Looting, vandalism, and crime became the norm for much of this period, culminating in the 1980s when prominent California gangs moved north to Portland, settling in Alberta.

Eventually, years and years of tolerating gang violence and crime exhausted many of Alberta's residents. They'd had enough and took action. A newfound sense of neighborhood activism in the '90s prompted the creation of two critical redevelopment organizations: The North/Northeast Economic Development Task Force and the Sabin Community Development Corporation. Through the work of these two groups, things began to turn around for the Alberta neighborhood. Artists began rehabbing and renting out the many boarded up storefronts, converting them into studio spaces and galleries. Thus, the Alberta Arts District was born.



### The Inevitable Dilemma

Fast-forward to present day and the Alberta Arts District is almost unrecognizable as the crime-ridden gang territory that it once was. While that's obviously a positive change, it's left Benson to face many of the same gentrification quandaries that Gregory Crichtlow has experienced with his neighborhood.

"Like many places in Portland, Alberta Arts has been subject to rapid gentrification over the past twenty years," she says. "It's a constant question of how to support what the neighborhood currently is and where it's going while honoring its past and trying to acknowledge some of the negative aspects of gentrification."

She's had to accept that, by deciding to open up a business and locating it where it is, she's inextricably a part of gentrifying a neighborhood. To combat this and do her best to rectify it, she's decided to try to use that "business owner" title for good.

"As business owners, we're often given outside voice in local politics and government," she says. "Ever since adding those two simple words next to my name, people listen harder to what I have to say and take my opinions more seriously than they did when I was just an average citizen. This reality used to make me feel uncomfortable — angry even — since I don't always feel like it's deserved, but now I see it as my responsibility to use that voice to amplify the needs of others in the community who are not given as much access."

"I'm constantly trying to learn how I can do more to use my voice well when I'm offered a seat at a decision-making table, invited to meetings with city officials, or recruited for planning committees for the business district. When I'm there, I try to think about whose voices are not being heard, how I can suggest that they be invited to the table and, when that's not possible, how I can speak up on their behalf."



### If at First You Don't Succeed...

Over the years, Benson's voice speaking up for people has gotten louder and stronger. It's made quite an impact. At this point, it's hard to think about Gladys Bikes without recalling all the great things the shop does towards making cycling a more inclusive space. With a distinct focus on creating a welcoming space for FTWN-identifying (femme, transgender, women, non-binary) riders, Benson (along with the rest of the crew at Gladys) aims to make everyone that walks through the door feel comfortable. This not only increases new ridership but also helps current WTFN-identifying riders feel more confident in their community.

So how do they do it?

Beyond the standard FTWN classes, group rides, and workshops that many shops are adding to their calendars (something Gladys has no shortage of), Benson says the biggest driver of the shops inclusion success has been trying new things. Sometimes they work, and sometimes they don't but she says the key is to always continue trying.

Of the things that she says have worked, a few in particular stand out.

#### 'Cross Curious Club

"This is a six-week program in the summer that's essentially Cyclocross 101. While some of the folks from the club end up getting really into cyclocross racing, all of them leave feeling more excited about bikes in general — and with a slew of new buddies to go on rides with. It's like summer camp for adults."

#### Saddle Library

"This large saddle demo program is about way more than just trying out new saddles. It's about introducing people to the idea that they shouldn't be in pain on a bike; that they should be allowed to talk about their bodies that bike shops and expert support. This may seem like a small thing but inviting people to be honest about their bodies and letting them know that we care about their comfort goes a long way towards getting them more excited about riding."

#### Basic Rights Oregon

"My current passion project is working to push for broader inclusivity in the Portland bike shop community. I'm working with educators at Basic Rights Oregon to do citywide training for bike shop employees about how we can create more welcoming spaces for trans-identified and non-binary customers and co-workers."

"This initiative speaks to the dual role that Gladys tries to play: both to invite more people into biking through the shop and its programs, as well as to use our shop as a tool to push the industry as a whole — both locally and nationally. Big changes don't happen overnight, but little by little we are helping to shift the conversation in new directions."

#### Seeking Feedback

"As business owners, we can get so lost in our own experiences sometimes that we forget that our shops are at their best when they are addressing a need within the community. I'm not always good at this, but I'm trying."

According to Benson, Gladys asks for feedback in a couple different ways:

- Gladys Advisory Board (GAB)** — A diverse group of customers that meets at the shop every few months to advise me on everything from outreach strategies, to what bikes to stock, to event ideas and everything in between.
- Friends of Gladys Bikes** — An active Facebook group that exists to build community amongst our customers and also to provide a venue where people can offer us feedback. I regularly take questions to them about new products and event ideas.

### "You Fit in Here. We Promise"

It only takes one read through the [Gladys manifesto](#) on the shop's website to see just how dedicated Benson and co. are to inclusion of all kinds. They promise to never assume that you like the color pink or floral patterns based on your gender alone, but also think it's awesome if you do. They'll listen to what you want and will respect your preferences from the moment you walk in the door. They'll help you find a bike that fits your body, your personality, and your lifestyle.

But above all else, they'll make you feel welcome and comfortable inside their shop.

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

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

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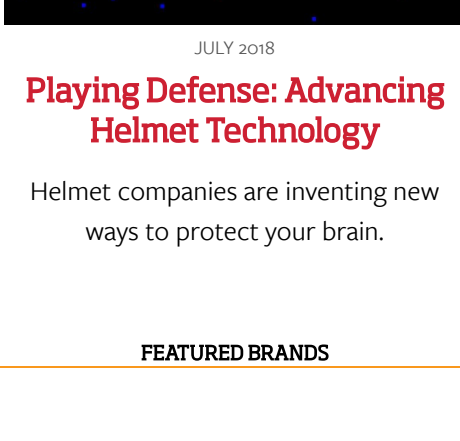
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