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Transcript

Speaker 1

It's time for the outspoken cyclist to weekly conversation about bicycles, cyclists, trails, travel advocacy, the bike industry and much, much more. You can subscribe to our weekly podcast at outspokencyclist.com, or through your favorite podcasting app to listen anytime. Now here's your host, Diane Janks.

Speaker 2

Hello and welcome to the outspoken cyclist. I'm your host, Diane Jenks. Thanks for tuning in today. I'm thinking many areas of our lives are going to be impacted as funding for programs as well as the institutions that disseminate that funding is pulled by the executive branch, one of the areas of great concern is transportation. Especially as it pertains to safety equity. Oops, there's that word and access. Vulnerable road users and those who rely on transportation other than a car will be negatively impacted and some of the hard work that has been going into removing past damage done to neighborhoods by wrong thinking on the part of planners. Is being interrupted or stopped altogether. My guest today is Professor Alex Carner from the University of Texas in Austin. I learned about Alex and his work in an article by Magdalena Duvalier, written for Bloomberg News, on February 26th. She stated quote Alex Carnar got an e-mail from the Transportation Research Board ordering him to stop work on his research project studying Equitable access to goods and services. End Quote of. My ears perked up and I took a dive into the rabbit hole, contacting the professor to find out more. Alex will be with me in a moment. My 2nd guest today is Maria Elena Price. She and her sister, Monica, are Co owners of experience, plus bicycle tours. Many years ago, Rick Price, the founder of experience plus along with his wife. Visited my store in downtown Cleveland along with several other Tour Company owners for a weekend touring open house. Each tour director gave a short presentation about the. He or she represented, and what I remembered most about experience plus was the emphasis on language and culture. In the tours they offered. When this new generation took up the reins, that emphasis didn't. And today's tours are as interesting, varied and immersive as they were then. Maria Elena and I dive into the background of the company and what it offers to day in the second-half of the show. Professor Alex Carner was one year into a two year grant when he received the e-mail from the Transportation Research Board. Ordering him to stop all work on the project he was overseeing into Equitable access to goods and services. Focusing on accessibility, civil rights and environmental justice, travel, demand modeling and community engagement, Alex brings his background in

civil engineering, transportation planning, and history together to look for solutions. Hi, Alex. Welcome to the outspoken. Thanks for being my guest today. Are you?

Speaker 3

I'm doing well. Thanks Dan. Are.

Speaker 2

I'm. I'm OK waiting for spring to get here and stay here.

Speaker 3

Great.

Speaker 2

Yeah, I know that's not gonna happen. Wishful. So I'd like to begin with a a bit of background about you and your work. Knows I love transportation conversations. I don't know how much I'm going. Love. One, but let's see where it goes. How did you become interested in transportation planning? Especially transportation issues for those who are disadvantaged, which seems to be a huge number of people and probably going to grow.

Speaker 3

Yep. So I well, first of all, thanks for inviting me onto the the podcast. Excited to be here. My background is in civil engineering, so when I was in college I was a civil. Major. And I took a number of different courses in the civil engineering program at University of Toronto, and I really thought I was going to become. A structural engineer. I really enjoyed structural engineering. You know, designing beams and columns. I wanted to get involved in in big structures, but as I kind of progressed through my undergraduate career, I had a couple of mentors that really encouraged me to think a bit more broadly about engineering activities. So not just limited to the particular structural Member the particular building, but understanding how engineering activities affected people, how engineering activities affected the environment, and that. Of got me. Thinking. It had the, you know, had the effect that I think they were looking for. So then when I decided to continue on a Graduate School. And I was looking around at advisors in civil engineering departments across the country. I wanted to work with someone who was doing something different than typical engineering work. And I started to get drawn towards transportation because of its link with climate change. And its link to energy. It just felt like it had a kind of, like, global transportation, kind of like a global reach. And I found an advisor at the University of California in Davis. Her name? Her name is Debney Myer, and she had listed environmental justice as one of her research interests. And I. I'm not sure if I knew what that term was, but been intriguing enough to go and search it out. And then I realized there was this whole kind of academic subfield that was looking at the disproportionate burdens faced by communities of color and low income communities. And also the disparate benefits that those communities receive

from from public investments. And so the very first project I ended up going to work with Deb and the very first project that I worked on was looking at a low income Latino community in San Diego called Baria Lo. It's a right next to the port of San Diego and they were heavily impacted by diesel truck traffic and folks in the community in collaboration with the city of San Diego and the port had come up with a project to to reroute truck traffic. To the outside of our community, and I looked at the air quality impacts of that mitigation to try to quantify the benefits. And for the community. And I was hooked after that. You know the kind of environmental justice frame really spoke to me. I love that there was this kind of community of researchers working on related issues, and it seemed like a really important place to kind of put my time and energy. And yeah, I just went from there. Didn't really look back.

Speaker

So.

Speaker 2

Back up a second and define environmental justice.

Speaker 3

Sure. So environmental justice is. That's well, it's the idea that everyone should be able to. Have access to an environment that is free from free from pollution, free from harm that you know feel safe and accessible, and it realizes that that that is not the case, and in fact the distribution. Of environmental harms, you know, across the country, across different states, at the level of individual neighborhoods, is actually patterned on socioeconomic characteristics. So the original environmental justice study looked at the distribution of. Toxic waste disposal facilities across the United States and was able to show a link between the presence of those facilities and the number of those FAC. And the share of black people in a in a particular geographic area. There's also a link to income that was made. So lower income areas have greater exposure to toxic waste disposal facilities. And since then, that first study conducted in the 1980s. There's been a whole host of work that's looked at different types of environmental exposures, looking at air pollution. Is water quality, you name it. And then going over to the transportation space, we look at things like the distribution of of access to opportunities. We can look at the benefits that different communities derive and the harms that they experience from particular transportation projects. And those are also all typically patterned on different socio economic characteristics.

Speaker 2

Let me take a moment to reintroduce you. We're speaking with Professor Alex. He's at the University of Texas in. He's a transportation guy. Everybody knows how much I like transportation related issues and this one, this is a big one. So we know what's going on kind of. In. So I want to know what is the Transportation Research Board and then we need to talk about what happened. To you and your current study.

Speaker 3

Yeah. So I hope you have a minute and you know, let me know if this is if this is too much detail, but the transportation. OK, great.

Speaker 2

Oh no.

Speaker 3

Your listeners are ready for a deep dive into the transportation research. So in the field we refer to the Transportation Research Board as as TRB, the favored acronym among transportation academics and practitioners. So TRB is it's a division of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and. So the National academies of the parent entity. And there. Some things you should know about the national. It was famously founded by President Lincoln in 1863, and it's an independent, nonprofit organization so independent from the executive branch. And the goal of the National academies is to provide objective and rigorous advice to Congress and the public that that's grounded in sound research. So national academies formed in the 1860s. The precursor to the what is now known as TRB was founded in 1920, and at that time the goal was to systematize Hwy. research. Rd. building was accelerating in the United States and folks were kind of experimenting with different materials and different techniques. They just needed to know what was going to work, what materials were. Best to build roads.

Speaker

And it grew.

Speaker 3

From there, to encompass all modes. So there's research going on under the umbrella of TRB that covers public transit highway. Aviation air, time modes, goods movement, etc. So everything and historically, TOB has played a key role in supporting transportation research. There are a number of activities that they're involved in, a number of programs that they support. A big one is the Transportation Research Board annual meeting. It's held every year in Washington, DC. Most recently had about 13,000 attendees, and it's a it's a really exciting conference. It's about 5 days. There are folks from academia practice and the private sector, so consultants go and it's like a good mix of people. The research is really. There are talks, there are posters, there are exhibitions. I've attended the Transformation Research Board annual meeting every year since 2008. Missing one year due to COVID. They also sponsor specialty conferences. So I was involved in planning and pulling off the second conference on advancing transportation equity. That was held this past July in Baltimore, but they'll have specialty conferences about safety research. Have specialty conferences about materials research. You know, if you can dream it up, they can sponsor especially. Although I think. Specialty conferences might be going. There's some budgetary issues

within the TRB that are. Going to at least scale down the number of specialty conferences that they sponsor, there's also another element of the Transportation Research Board. This is where my work is kind of implicated. So under the Transportation Research Board is another program called the Cooperative Research programs. And so these are their modal. Once there's a national cooperative, Hwy. research program, there's a transit cooperative research program. There's an aviation one and a safety one as well. And this is where this idea of the national academies as independent. Kind of trick. Key because the research that's supported through these various cooperative research programs, for example the national Cooperative Hwy. research program under the National Academies. You know, nominally independent, but they receive a lot of their funding through the Federal Highway Administration. Right. So there's a tie to. Executive branch. And states receive federal funds for planning and research. They're called SP and R funds. And they typically give back a portion of those funds to the cooperative. To the National Cooperative Hybrid Research program to support research. So the idea is that. States. Kind of pull their federal research funds. Federal highways kicks in additional funds, and then they can sponsor work. Of mutual. So instead of every state dot, you know doing a study on pedestrian safety say they can pull their funds, do one report that's kind of relevant for a lot of different geographic areas. The other programs get similar federal funding, so the transit cooperative research program gets funded by Federal Transit administration. So TRB is out. They're sponsoring work under the guise of these cooperative research programs and kind of portraying themselves as independent. They're they're not actually independent because federal money is being used to support the work. The executive branch can kind of step in and in principle exert control, which is what's happened. Over the past. Well, I guess a month that started happening at the end of January, which I guess we can. Into next, does that all make sense? I clarify anything.

Speaker 2

No, I think it makes perfect. And what we'll do is put a link to the TRB and let people look for themselves if they're interested in some of the programs and projects that are ongoing or maybe were ongoing, which is where we're going to be heading. But I guess I have a question about where. Bicycles and pedestrians might fit in there. Well, first of all, is it a grant making or is it funding in a different way?

Speaker 3

Yeah. So maybe it. Be helpful if I can describe what a typical, for example, a cooperative research program project looks like. So there's a process of the cooperative research program soliciting research needs statements so you could submit one. I could submit one someone at a state dot could submit one. Just write up what the kind. Research need is. In a kind of statement, there's a template. You follow. A committee is assembled to kind of vet the different research statements and then select the best ones to go out to bid. So let's say they receive 100 problem statements, maybe they

select. 30 for a particular program to go to bid for each of those 30 projects, a committee of experts is assembled to oversee the research. Why it's? So it's not a. A grant is typically. Here's the. Go do what you said during the proposal. See you at. Grant, this is actually a contract and it's a special type of contract called a cooperative agreement, where the funder is actually checking in all the time on your progress and making sure that you did exactly what you said you were going to do in the contract. So spec. And timelines and. That you have to hit. But there are certainly pedestrian and bicycling projects that are funded through the National Cooperative Hybrid Research program. We we've identified 14 projects that were cancelled, including mine worth about \$6.5 million. Of research funds. And there are a number of projects that had a kind of bike or PED. Focus.

Speaker 2

I want to get into your stop work order situation and what your study was in fact you were given a stop work order and so you're kind of dangling in the air.

Speaker

Yeah.

Speaker 2

Take a short break. When we come back, we'll talk about that. We're speaking with Professor Alex Carner from the University of Texas at Austin. You are listening to the outspoken cyclist. Be right back. We are back on the outspoken cyclist. I'm Diane. We are speaking with Professor Alex Carner at the University of Texas at Austin. Is.

Speaker

An.

Speaker 2

Engineer kind. He's a transportation specialist, which everybody knows. I love transportation stuff, and so we talked about environmental justice and we talked about. Out how the work that he does has been funded, so now we need to talk about the work that you were doing got defunded, what happened and when.

Speaker 3

Yeah. So I was involved in a. I was the the principal investigator, so the lead, you know, I led the proposal, got the funding from the National Cooperative Hwy. Research program. The project was called how to assess and address equity of access to goods and services. Which is admittedly kind of a mouthful, but. Actually a pretty simple. So there's a concept in transportation planning in mostly in the academic literature that we refer to as. And we don't necessarily mean it in the way that a regular person on the street would understand that. Usually people think about, you know, making sure that facilities are accessible for people with disabilities. So kind of like Americans with

Disabilities Act compliance and things like that. We're thinking a little bit more broadly about how easily people can get to the things that they need. To live a meaningful life. So what are the transportation resources they have access to? Is one part of access, but also what are the opportunities that they are able to reach in space? Where are. Where is healthy food? Where are daycares and and other types of services. Health access is a big issue in this in this field. So measures of access are really nice because the typical performance measure that a state dot engineer would use is congestion, right? If a link is congested, it needs to be mitigated. Need to expand the road? Was with access, you can actually have conditions where congestion you know looks bad according to the highway capacity manual or level of service guidelines that an engineer is following and but access is really quite high. So if there are lots of destinations nearby. You can still have high access, especially multimodal access. If you're thinking about bike and PED and public transit and locations where congestion is high, you can also start to think about bringing land use. Into the transportation planners toolkit. So you can create conditions of high accessibility just by putting things close to where people are, so you don't necessarily need to have transportation investments or hard transportation infrastructure to enhance access. You just have to allow greater density or greater diversity of land uses. Place so it's. It's a very powerful idea. Historically, accessibility has been quantified in a very specific way. So for example, looking at the number of jobs that you can reach from every neighborhood in the city. Within 45 minutes on public transit, so you kind of go neighborhood by neighborhood. Look OK from from neighborhood A. What places can I reach within 45 minutes you add up all the jobs and then you associate with neighborhood a. Then you go. Neighborhood B. Do the exact same. Do that for all the neighborhoods you get kind of a score for every neighborhood. That score is really useful again, in contrast to typical measures of performance like congestion. But it doesn't really get at the individual experience of accessibility, and there's a reason to believe that that could differ for different people. If if wheelchair user for example. And I I tell you that you can. 100,000 jobs within 45 minutes on public transit, you would come to me and say, well, that's ***** because the transit stop that's near my house is is not physically. I actually can't get to the stop or I can't board the vehicle. Or when I try to board the vehicle, the bus driver doesn't want to take the time to load my wheelchair up and. Or she just. Just passes me and so the actual time it takes is I can't reach all those jobs in 45 minutes. Would take me. 90 minutes to reach the same jobs. So there are different characteristics of individuals that affect their accessibility experience. So people with disabilities is 1. You can imagine queer trans travelers also having different experiences on public transit and interacting with other passengers and operators. Black people. Have a particular experience of public. We know that they're disproportionately targeted by law enforcement, whether whether they're driving, walking or cycling, recent immigrants might not want to interact with law enforcement either. Immigration officials, so the the crux of the project involved thinking about different groups. That have different travel experiences and trying to get a sense of what the barriers to access might be for those folks. And we conducted about 40 interviews with transportation planning agencies to try to understand how. State dots

and metropolitan planning organizations and local agencies work thinking about these differences between travelers. We also conducted a number of focus groups with advocacy organizations that work directly with those types of populations, and our goal was simply to bring those two things together. The agency perspectives and the advocacy perspective into a guidebook that an agency could use to better understand the travel. Of diverse populations in their jurisdiction. And try to address them. So that was the project. We received a stop work order. January. 9th, which was a couple days after. The Trump administration. And had promulgated these two. Executive orders that were targeting what they refer to as dei initiatives, policies, programs, etc. And I will say so. This was a \$500,000. We were a year into a two year project and when the stop work order came down I and some of my colleagues. Felt a need to document and track all of the cancellations that were happening and so we have a Google sheet that is publicly available. Tracking all the cooperative research program project cancellations. Yeah, we've been kind of writing about. Trying. Get the word out. That you know something is up at.

Speaker 2

So I would love to have that link to that document so that we can also put that on our website at smokeless.com. So and I've been thinking about this a lot, this whole dei thing that is so abhorrent to the administration, for some, God knows reason. What is the possibility that we can rename this so it doesn't look like what they think it looks like?

Speaker 3

Yeah. I mean the problem with just renaming. It seems like right now what happened, especially at TRB in the cooperative research program, is that they just did a basic kind. Keyword search. To flag particular projects, so the first set of cuts they all literally had the word equity in the title. There were some that had the word equitable that were not flagged and not cancelled. There. There's since been a second round of cuts and it seems like they're going a little broader. So the the word equity does not appear in the title. But it's clear that. The goal of the project comports with whatever the idea of DI the administration has is. So I think that they're gonna get savvier at identifying these. So I don't think that's simply changing the language is going to. It's gonna save us here this this research is really at risk. And this is one of the reasons why I'm speaking out and writing about it, because I think that the work is critically important. And just because we don't study things like disparities just because we don't study things like environmental justice or inequities doesn't mean that they don't.

Speaker

This.

Speaker 3

And so I think it's, yeah, more important than ever to talk about this work, you know, discuss its value. And I'm. I'm gonna keep doing it. And I'm gonna keep talking about my work in the same. That I always.

Speaker 2

Have. Yeah. Good. I'm glad to hear that. What do you think the long term short term? It's putting a lot of people out of work. It's disrupting things in just the most horrific ways, but long term. What would be the problem? And and I'm not assuming it's going to stay long term because hopefully the midterms will come up and something will change. Might grow a pair and actually stand up in Congress and say this just can't stand.

Speaker

Yeah.

Speaker 2

What are the long term effects of the of stopping what you're doing specifically in transportation and? Equity, I just see that there are so many possibilities of people being affected by this. I just can't even see down the road. I'm like, mired in what you just said.

Speaker 3

Yeah, yes, there are few different scales of impacts that I'd probably enumerate. One is the effect on higher education. So I I was leading this contract for national academies. That money comes into the University of Texas. I use it to fund a little bit of my time, but the important piece is to fund student time, so the immediate effect of these particular freezes. Will be less student funding. And there are broader efforts to cut research funding that are emanating from the administration, whether it's the NIH indirect rate reduction that they're pursuing, which will leave less money for. Universities in general, they're also major staffing cuts being contemplated at the National Science Foundation and an overall budget cuts to both NSF and NIH. Those will have effects on student student funding. Just like fewer students being admitted. Fuel resources coming in universities, I think there will be like a general contraction at at universities in terms of total enrollment. Staff, you know, faculty hiring is going to slow. So effects on on students and universities the other way that I use the funds is that I hire subcontractors to carry out different parts of the work. For example, on my project I had. Center for Neighborhood Technology, which is a nonprofit based out of Chicago that does various projects in the transportation equity space and then also on Equitable Cities, which is a small shop led by Charles Brown that also does work on transportation equity and pedestrian safety and racial injustice and. Those folks rely on these types of contracts, and they're going to be heavily affected. So even if you know there's a midterm change. It's likely that some of these smaller firms that really specialize in this area, you know, it'll be too late for them. The. Will have. People have found different jobs and all that kind of institutional memory will be lost. It'll be hard to build it up even if the money starts coming back.

Speaker

OK.

Speaker 3

And yeah. Think the other thing is just there will be. There will be impacts on the transportation experience. For the populations. That we're trying to focus on in our. So these are folks that typically don't have access to a car. They're relying on public transit, walking or cycling for transportation. They're often using public transit, walking and cycling, and conditions that are less than ideal. They're spending a large amount of their household budget on transportation in in some cases. If they if they have to own a car. And we're just. Yeah, we're just not going to be improving conditions for those folks are not lifting those folks out of poverty. Not providing them with social mobility. And so there's kind of a a broader societal impact. That's probably difficult to measure, but we'll we'll certainly be felt.

Speaker 2

Let's take another short break. And when we return, we'll speak with Alex some more. You're listening to the outspoken cyclist. Do you see any relationship between higher education on your end and the lack of higher education and in the administration? I'm not seeing PhD's here. I am not seeing people who look. At at research as being important. To their agendas and and not understanding evidently what research means and what's come out of it over the many years we've been doing it.

Speaker 3

OK.

Speaker

Mm.

Speaker 2

And that's my fear is that they are just throwing research under the bus, saying we don't need it. And I'm wondering why I think that.

Speaker 3

Yeah. There's this view that higher education is is the enemy. A lot of critiques of the administration and their policies emanate from universities, right from from faculty. Where once we have tenure. In principle, we have academic freedom. We enjoy freedom of speech. We can basically say whatever we want without fear of losing our jobs. And so there's a lot of critique coming coming from universities. So I I see. What's happening on the transportation side and the broader effort to?

Speaker

I.

Speaker 3

Research funding as as the administration kind of sticking a finger in the eye. Of the Academy. Right. There's also the substantive outcomes of the research. So on the transportation side. You know, we're often thinking about how can we make public transit walking and cycling more viable? Modes. So think about issues related to sustainability. Our attention to equity and justice related issues. And those goals, those normative goals of our research, don't comport with the normative goals for transportation policy of the administration. Which seem to be a return to focus on Hwy. building. So if that's your goal, then you don't care about the work that we're doing. You don't see it as valuable. There's also work on climate change that's funded throughout the, you know, funded by the executive branch or historically funded by the executive branch. If you're an administration that doesn't believe. Change or doesn't think that the. Costs of mitigating climate change are worth the like the public cost of the in climate change is not necessarily worth the private cost of industries to kind of. And change their. Then you don't want to fund climate change research because you don't care, right? So. I think both of those things are are kind of going on and and driving the the administration in that. I think if you look though like there are a lot of people in the administration that that often tout their their Ivy League degrees. And so they've benefited from higher. But now they yeah, they see it in that it's in their interest to. You know, take us. Take us down a peg.

Speaker 2

It's it's so difficult for me, having grown up in an environment where education. Was in the center of everything, even though I didn't get a really really fine pH D type education, education was always stressed in my family.

Speaker 3

Mm.

Speaker 2

I just don't understand what's going on at this point. And a lot of it is I don't understand it. I mean, I don't see any reason for it other than because I can, you know, and that's really. Cult, I think for a lot of us, I think journalism is taking a huge hit. So you know you're not going to have that. That voice we were talking about being tenured and having freedom of speech and being able to say what you want. But look what happened. Thing a. Of people resigned their positions over free speech issues, and so I don't know.

Speaker 3

That's true. That's true.

Speaker 2

I don't.

Speaker

Yeah, yeah.

Speaker 2

What are you going to do now?

Speaker 3

Yeah. So I think that the, the only thing that I see. As a viable kind of way forward. Is people coming together and building power collectively across? Race, class, gender and even political ideology. Like, I don't think that it's a good idea to try to exclude people that supported the current administration. You know, clearly they many of those folks feel that they've been kind of left behind or have not been well served by. The by the state, you know, writ large. And so I'm focusing some of my efforts right now. On studies that are looking at identifying the benefits associated. Community organizing. And so I have a project that I'm working on where I'm focusing on tenant organizing in Austin and I'm trying to look at the health impacts of tenant organizing. So people coming together within their apartment complex. And staving off rent increases, pushing back against management. That is, you know, not performing timely maintenance, trying to remediate various issues related to Mold Pass. Unreliable heating, ventilation. Air conditioning. And so I think improving. But you know your lived experience of housing through organizing efforts is likely to have an impact on your health, right? Health. You've got a healthier living. You're going to feel better going to report that your health is improved. Going. Have an effect on your mental health by your level of stress, day-to-day stress, and it's going to connect you more with. It's going to. Of community. So I'm. To operationalize all those things, to basically make the case that community organizing is a public health intervention and the hope is that I'll be able to pursue research funds. To engage in a larger study, it's kind of at a pilot. Right now I'm trying to get about 30 households involved, but then long term I want to take the same insights and apply them to public transit. So looking at public transit rider unions. And the reason that I'm starting with tenants in Austin is because there's already a pretty well developed set of organizations that are doing tenant organizing and the public transit organizing piece hasn't really taken off yet. I'd love to investigate transit rider. Figure out how to kind of like, seed it and start it. And then understand how those organizations can be successful at winning better service in their communities and then also leading to enhanced accessibility, access opportunities and and better physical and mental health. So that's what I'm working on, bringing people together to, to build power, to make change.

Speaker 2

So I have one last question and it has to do with funding. If the government doesn't want to fund these things, do you see anywhere in the greater social network? Where somebody might be interested in this for funding and doesn't need to rely on the federal government or even even state dots, you know that. Who's got a **** ton of money might say. Know what this is interesting to me. I grew up in, you know, Watson, Los Angeles, and I I think this is. Good idea.

Speaker

Yeah.

Speaker 3

Yeah. So there are other sources of funding for sure. Local governments sometimes fund. I've done projects for City of Austin. County governments will sometimes fund research, I think, as the federal government kind of recedes, state and local governments will have to step in. There are also nonprofit foundations and other philanthropic organizations that support research. I think, depending on the extent of the cut. At NIH and NSF. Those kind of nonprofit funders are going to be slammed with requests, so it's not necessarily. To be. One nice thing about being a, you know, a tenured faculty member is that I I do have a salary that gets paid. And so I'm expected to pursue research, whether I have funding for a particular project or not.

Speaker

And.

Speaker 3

So I'm able to do that. You know, I have some of my own time, but I can give. Students are always interested. And coming onto the. So I can continue to pursue these projects. It would just happen at a slower pace. If I'm not able to get the resources out, you know, hire additional students and bring on subcontractors and things like that. There, you know, there are alternative avenues. But I I think yeah, the overall effect is going to be kind of shrink amount of sponsored research that's happening within higher Ed.

Speaker 2

We've been speaking with Alex. He is a professor at University of Texas at Austin. Really a fascinating. One I'm you know, I'd love to know more about and how can my listeners follow your work? Would be the best way. To contact you or just watch what you're doing.

Speaker 3

Yeah. So folks can go to my website alexcarner.com. Are lots of links there. Last. Starts with the letter K. So yeah, Alex KRNE r.com. Lots of links to prior. A lot of it is open source so folks can can take a look there. Also, I've been starting to be more active on

Blue sky and especially LinkedIn has been pretty vibrant right now, especially with all the layoffs and.

Speaker 2

Yeah.

Speaker 3

Federal workers. Kind of posting about their experiences and other academics kind of chiming in. So LinkedIn and Blue Sky are probably the other good places to. Reach me.

Speaker 2

Well, I really. Really appreciate you taking time to talk with me today. Fascinating conversation. I can't wait to get the response that I think I'm going to get to it now and it'll be positive and negative. There'll be people going around, but a lot of people I think are going to say. Oh, here we. What can we do to help? So thank you very much. I hope you have a great spring semester and. As we say in our business, keep the rubber side down.

Speaker 3

Thanks, Diane.

Speaker 2

Yeah. Take care. My thanks to Professor Carner for joining me on the show today. As of this episode of the show, the wholesale dismantling of many institutions and programs is still going on in DC as Alex said, he is trying to put together some calmer heads to get back into rese. We will continue to stay in touch and see how things develop over the next few months. You can follow Alex and his work on his website, Alex Carner com ALEXKARNE r.com as well as read some of his recent work. There is also the list of the cancelled transportation research projects as of our conversation. At outspokencyclist.com. Let's take a short break, and when we return, Maria Elena Price from experience plus bicycle. Will join me. You're listening to the outspoken cyclist. We are back on the outspoken cyclist. Your host, Diane Jenks. My guest is Maria Elena Price, one of the Co owners of experience, plus bicycle tours. She and her sister Monica, who lives in Italy with her family. And overseas, the European piece of the company have followed in their parents footsteps, stepping into the roles overseeing the 50 year old touring company. Hello, Maria Elena.

Speaker

Hi.

Speaker 2

I got got it right.

Speaker 4

Yes, yes you did.

Speaker 2

Oh, welcome to the outspoken cyclist. For being my guest. You know, I'm really excited to talk to you because you're like the next generation. I know your dad. I met him in the 90s. He was in Cleveland at my store. And I'll tell you his our story later. But thank you for being a guest today.

Speaker 4

Yeah. Thanks for having. I'm I'm happy to represent the second generation.

Speaker 2

Yeah, no kidding. You and your sister Monica, are Co owners of experience plus. And the thing I remember most about experience plus is that everybody was highly educated and that played into the experience. No pun intended that you received as a guest of your company. Because people were fluent in the language where you were traveling or they were fluent in the history and and culture where you were traveling. And I think people, especially people who listen to this. Like that they want. They want that kind of experience. So tell me about your. As if I didn't know a little bit about it and how bicycle touring, you just naturally kind of fell into it.

Speaker 4

We did naturally, of course, fall into it. My sister and I were part of the experience plus world. Since we were little. It was a Home Office for a number of years. We actually had people in our house. And planning and selling trips. You know my parents and my dad went full time to managing bicycle tours in the late 80s, and the company really grew in the 90s and expanded beyond Italy in in that decade. And early 2000s, it grew also in in other ways. So Monica and I have it to a certain. In our. We were when we were little, we would go on tour actually in Europe, so we would spend every summer in Italy. Grew up. Our home language was Italian, but we were living in the United States and my parents would be guiding trips. Originally just in Italy and then we expanded into France and other European countries, we would maybe join for a few days and then we would go spend time with our relatives while our parents continued on and did longer trips. And as we grew up and got into our. Years we actually. Spent time scouting and helping our parents scout new trips. We would do self supported bike trips in Europe or just camping and driving scouting. My father was a. PH. D in geography and my mother was a pH. D in foreign languages and literature, and that's where. The desire and the intuition that travel is really about learning and understanding a new place is rooted, and that was something that was always part of how we experienced places. Because of that and the. Became the perfect vehicle to actually really see and get to know a place, and I would say that we understood that intuitively based on what we saw on tour with

our parents and how they were leading trips. And also based on our own experiences as we were growing up. And so we became tour leaders and considered tour leaders as the company grew already in our teenage years, we would be on tour even without my parents, as fellow tour leaders with some of our other some family members. My cousin and my uncle were both tour leaders for a while. In the early days. And then other toy leaders, who were often bilingual and multicultural. For a while, there were a lot of teachers 'cause. It was a seasonal business and a seasonal time that some teachers could come over in the summer or they were in Europe and they could join in the summer for a few trips. So yeah, that was our upbringing, and it was just ingrained in us that that the purpose of this kind of travel is to help people really create a connection to a new place and to the understanding of that culture and. So in the design of the trip and in the design of the bike rides and the places you stay and the experiences you have on tour. That was the ethos they instilled in us, and that's still the ethos that. Plus, that's a really important part of how we plan new trips and how we think about new destinations and what we want people to see and understand and how we find tour leaders.

Speaker 2

So it still stands out to me that experience plus. Is different from a lot of the other tour companies because of that because of that. Immersion that you get when you arrive at a destination and that you choose a destination based on some of these things. Let's talk about some of those destinations. What are your most popular trips? And I know that's kind of an unfair question because I'm sure all of them are booked. I already looked online and some are already. Closed for the season. So, but what are some of the most popular experience plus tours?

Speaker 4

Sure. So Italy is our second. We actually have our Italian operator is based in Italy and it's a European operator that supports our trips from from a logistics and equipment perspective. In most of Europe, and then of course, we have local tour leaders in each country. One thing about the destinations we offer is that and it's something I wouldn't advise for strategic perspective we have.

Speaker

Listen.

Speaker 4

Many different trips, so we actually run tours, just maybe one or two itineraries or one or two departures of a particular itinerary based on the season. And we have, you know, about 50 different itineraries across the world. About 40, probably just within Europe. And so that means that to think about which is the most popular is really more relevant to which country has the most itineraries. And right now it's Italy, France and Portugal has been really popular. Last few years, it's. Been it's been growing in

popularity. We've we were in Portugal already in the early 90s and then we stopped running trips there for a while as we expanded into other parts of Europe like Croatia and Slovenia in the 2000s and expanded more into Austria and Germany. And Spain and then we've been back in Portugal now for about 7 years and it's still going pretty strong.

Speaker 2

Portugal seems to be a real gathering place for cyclists at all levels because I think a lot of the elite cyclists train live and train in Portugal and areas and Spain.

Speaker 4

Portugal and Spain, yeah. Also in.

Speaker 2

Yeah. So that I can understand why people. To go and. Know people who have been to Portugal and say you just need to go. It's just fabulous so. Yeah, I can understand that, so. Oh. Experience plus is like 50 years.

Speaker

Explore.

Speaker 2

How many other tour companies can go back that far and be successful? Do you have any idea?

Speaker 4

There's a. Of us, I think the standard large ones here in the US are all about the same. We all started in the early 70s seventy 274, but we are definitely one of the 1st. And we are proud that we're still family owned and Monica and I, you know, we both had education that took would have taken and could have taken us to different industries and different careers. Years and Monica did work in International Development and I did an MBA and international affairs. But as you can tell, both still leaned in that concept of international and bridging of places. And even though we also both worked for a time. Did internships in these other industries. We realized that the foundation of what my parents had built. Felt still served an important role. In in really enabling people to get outside and outside of their comfort. Maybe in some cases, whether it's physically or also in other ways, and to really see new places and learn, and we think that's important in the world, maybe more than ever. And I I think that it's so, yeah. We came back to the business. You know, it's also been a lot of up and down like like any long standing business. In the 90s and they're, you know, in 9-11 in the recession of 2008, which is actually when Monica and I ended up taking over and and taking ownership on one hand, it was hard because it was when we were one of the smallest we'd been. Those

30 years since they'd. But it was also a good time to rebuild. So. So we've experienced a lot and then of course the last 10 years have been interesting.

Speaker 2

Yes, they. Let me take a moment to reintroduce you. We're speaking with Maria Elena. Elaina yes, Elena. OK. I'll get it right. Get it? Price from experience plus so I've known about experience plus since the 90s when I met her. All right, I'll tell you the story. So years ago, we had at our little store in downtown Cleveland. A weekend of touring open house and we invited tour operators to come and give talks about their companies and Rick Price. Her dad was one of those people. Well, after the weekend or the evening between Friday and Saturday. We did one Friday evening and then another presentation on Saturday. They all came back to our house and we sat around and talked and I said to everybody. What is the one thing that you wish would be different about your business that could be improved and almost unanimously, everybody said nobody reads the damn departure guide. And now? Don't know if it's changed or not, but that led to me writing a book about how to take a bicycle tour. And I credit your dad, I think was the first one to say. Nobody listens to nobody reads it, because of course he's a reader and so. Our people, I I'm sure you still do. Departure guide. Is that still a problem?

Speaker 4

Well, yeah, it also depends what you mean by preparation, because there's so many elements to prepare for. Right. Is it the the, the travel and the packing? It the international planning. It. The preparation from a physical perspective, so I'm curious. In your book, I assume you probably talked about all of those pieces.

Speaker 2

Yes, absolutely. From choosing a tour all the way through, how to train and bibliography of things to read, and a list of touring companies and weather. Yeah, there are a lot of elements, but it's not like you guys don't say that at your departure, guys.

Speaker 4

Yeah, we all say. So on one hand, you know the reason to go with a bike touring company is because at least the where you're going to go and where you're going to sleep and where you're going to ride is settled. You know what we plan for you and I think. That is, if you're probably planning your own trip. Takes most of your attention.

Speaker 2

And so I.

Speaker 4

Think what people think of is like, oh, I don't need to think about anything anymore. And of course, they still do because our our trips still start at the meeting point and end at

the ending. So getting to the meeting point, you know, requires some international travel and that's one part of preparation. And then also making sure you're prepared for the physical part of it is, is one as well. And so understanding and providing information about the level of the trip. And and. Of that should happen before somebody selects a tour. You know with with websites and information online. On one hand, I think people are better informed, but there's also information overload still, because there's so much information out there. And now the way I think. For better or for worse, I would say people just expect the right information to come to them at the right time. And that's really hard to do as a small. Company because it involves certain technologies and certain management and automations, and we're working on. So I think the more we can do that, the more people will still feel prepared. But we certainly you know, unfortunately we still over communicate whether it's via e-mail or on our website. We put a lot of information about itineraries on our website more than almost any other. And sometimes we think too much, because then it gets people nervous like we put so much information about the day's ride and then some people really hone in on the one day. Really hard. And so we actually have people who say, you know, well, maybe I'll get an E bike and it's like there's ten other days on the tour that you could do. Don't need an E bike for one day. So yeah, I would say preparation is still one of the largest points, but I also think there's a lot more tools now than there were before to help people get the right information. And so maybe it's it's a little bit better than it used to be.

Speaker 2

Let's take a short break, and when we come back, I want to sort of dig into the mechanical nuts and bolts of experience. We're speaking with Maria Elena. She is one of the Co owners she and her sister Monica of experience. They are continuing the legacy. That their mom and dad started many years ago, and it's a pleasure. Speak with. You're listening to the outspoken cyclist. We'll be right back. We are back on the outspoken cyclist and we're going to talk a little bit about the actual experience plus experience, so I want to ask 1st about your tour leaders back in the day. I mean, obviously it was your mom, your dad. You guys, as you got older. Where do you find your tour leaders now and how do you vet them in a way that they enhance the experience of the tour?

Speaker 4

Sure. So when my parents were guiding, you know, they were professors and instructors at the university. And so they had a network and underst. That the similar people to them would have that same kind of time. Now that has changed. What has mostly changed is that there's been a professionalization, I would say, of the. World even this adventure travel world that we live in, an active travel. And so we really cared about finding local guides too. And that is harder to do as you expand your portfolio. Sometimes we work with local partners. Other small local tour, bike, bike tour operators, or even just guiding companies to find the guides. But I would say 80% are still directly hired by us now, with the Internet reach we can put in ads around the world. And look

for the right people who have that inclination to be active, but also want to share their country with people. And some people have previous guiding experience. People. We actually, I just had a meeting with the new trainees for this year. And three of them were teachers, most of them in the secondary and primary level. They were also looking at more of a kind of a seasonal. Or they were looking for that and we find that if you find the right person who is excited about sharing. And really understands how to interpret what we call, you know, the interpretation and not just language, but also the cultural side. Then we can train them on the bikes and other things. We often get a lot of applicants who are like I'm such a great cyclist, you know, I'm a racer and I do all these things. And the first question we say is well, do you like to be? People. Because if you don't, you can be as good of a cyclist as you want. But if you don't enjoy. Really supporting and helping people then this isn't the. Role for you? So we've been able to find and to have a pretty good process. We are very lucky that our tour leaders stay with us. I think our average tenure is 6 or seven years because they come back every year and every year. We also refresh the the crew, but we have about 60 to 80 tour leaders that work with us. Throughout Europe and and and South America and we train. We have a very rigorous training program that we're actually started having in a couple weeks in Italy and we bring all of our European toilers to one place every year, and we found that that is a big investment, but it pays off.

Speaker 2

I'll bet it. So a couple of nuts and bolts questions. Do people bring their own? I saw you have a beautiful variety of bikes that people can rent while they're on your tours all the way down into tandems, which I am all for. My husband and I ride a tandem, but can somebody bring his or?

Speaker 4

Like they can, but we've actually found that we really have one or two people every two or three years who does very, very. We feel just like the it's important to have a strong design of the trip and important to think about safe roads and things like that. Is really important. You're gonna be on this bike for a lot. Of hours probably, and our trips tend to be longer than other trips. We have a seven or eight day option or a 11:50 day option, often on many of our departures. Yeah. So we invested in titanium frames back in 2009. And we've been refreshing that titanium free for the muscular bikes, the muscle bikes. And then as E bikes have grown in the last 10 years, we have also now have pretty much an equivalent fleet of E bikes. Our bike types have doubled, which of course makes logistics and costs.

Speaker 2

Doubled right?

Speaker 4

Which which is has definitely complicated our world, but it's also opened up. The opportunity of bike touring to a lot of people, so we see the pros and the cons for sure, and I think the pros still. The cons?

Speaker 2

So the average number of people on a tour. Fill in.

Speaker 4

The blank our maximum is 18, but I would say average were 12 to 14.

Speaker 2

Nice group.

Speaker 4

Yeah, that is a size now.

Speaker 2

That's a nice 1, and I imagine you'll do a custom tour of somebody wants to bring a group over.

Speaker 4

Yeah, we. A lot of private departures like you could even take one of our trips and and just pick your own. We usually require minimum of 6 to 9 people depending on the date. If it's high season we work. We require more like 8 or 9 folks. But if it's low. Season date, even as low as. We can do a private departure and then if you want to change the itinerary, we can do a custom itinerary as well. And we do a number of those every year and we've seen more of an uptick in that desire after COVID as people want to spend the. They want to spend with with their friends. And more people are traveling. That's one of the benefits of being able to have having a really large portfolio of TRIPS is that we can really offer a number of options to people who want to browse and kind of. Going many places.

Speaker 2

I also know that people who don't necessarily go with either one or two of their friends or spouse or whatever, usually make friends on tours. They are longtime friends and end up doing for other over and over again.

Speaker 4

Absolutely. That is very. We have so many pockets of friends who have, you know, and then and then it grows like, oh, we met on this tour. And then, like, two groups all of a sudden, they're now travel. You know, they fill up trips pretty fast. Actually. That's one of the reason why some trips, especially new trips, get filled up pretty fast.

Speaker 2

So what is your repeat client? I imagine it's a fairly high percentage.

Speaker 4

It's very. So in fact, it's one of the things I'm trying to get more new people.

Speaker 2

I understand the way about about bicycles.

Speaker 4

Yeah. So we every year 65 to 67% of our customers have. Traveled with us.

Speaker 2

Wow, that's a huge percentage.

Speaker

Yeah, it's huge.

Speaker 2

It is huge. Tell me a little bit about your accommodations and. I mean, obviously everybody rides to eat so we can do that.

Speaker 4

Right. So we have a few different tour styles and some of the difference are also differences are in accommodation. Some of the differences are in length. Our classic bike tour. Guided bike. We stay in three and four-star hotels, tending towards more 4 star depending on where you are, there has been a little bit what I call the luxurification of this type of travel. And on one hand, we understand that because it is nice to have a comfortable bed and a place to sleep and and you want your creature comforts. But we actually have also introduced a style like our explorer. We want the opportunity to stay in two and three stars if we want to because maybe the great bike Rd. that we were on ends in a place that only has a two and three star and then the accessibility of it from a budget perspective is also a. Bit more manageable. So on our explorer's we tend. More in three. And we will even go to a two star, but our classic tours and our bike and boat tours and well, our expedition tours are a little bit different. But they're classic at our bike and boat tend to stay in four-star hotels, our expedition tours. We. Kind of between 2:00 and 4:00. Those trips tend to be more of our cross continental tours and also long distance and the same thing if we feel like it's in a fabulous ride and ends up in a small town somewhere, we will stay in the lodging that's that's available. Our prerequisite is is generally still private bathroom and you know, comfortable beds as much as possible and good meal.

Speaker 2

And good meal. Yes, indeed. Hot shower, good meal. Are the two.

Speaker 4

Hot shower, correct?

Speaker 2

So I assume you also when people and this is I should have asked this before when we were talking about the bicycle fleet itself. I assume you do some sort of fitting, either ahead of time to get the right bike there and then final final fitting when somebody shows up.

Speaker 4

Absolutely. Yeah, we take all the information and we assign an actual, you know, our bike assignments are personalized. They have. Is the right. We'll even take a diagram of your bike fit if you want, and our mechanics will set it up on the bike that was assigned to you. You and then we always have time after our safety. We do an orientation talk and we have a personal one-on-one bike fitting with our tour leaders for every person and then a test ride on the first day.

Speaker 2

So I noticed that you say bring your own helmet. About pedals and saddles.

Speaker 4

If if you clip and you have a saddle that you care about, we we recommend people bring their own pedals. And we do not stock all the different pedals and we just find, you know, if you really are bringing or clipping, and you probably want your own pedals with their own. Anyway, so we encourage people to bring that.

Speaker 2

So are you still riding?

Speaker 4

I. I have a, you know, COVID was crazy.

Speaker 2

Yes, it would.

Speaker 4

I I gave birth a month before COVID. So on one hand, I got to spend a lot more time than I thought with our son. And it's been fun to get him on a bike. He's been biking now since he was three on two wheels, so that's been exciting, and we're hoping to do more.

Hoping to get out more and more. Here in. I do more mountain biking, sure. Than than Rd. riding. And gravel is of course, the new fad. So what is gravel riding?

Speaker 2

You know my husband and I go over this constantly about the idea that we have to give it a name, which means then we have to change the bike. Which it hasn't changed.

Speaker 4

It's just a touring bike with not beer tires.

Speaker 2

Thank you. Much because that is exactly what we say.

Speaker 4

I think most people know that.

Speaker

What?

Speaker 2

Well, this has just been a wonderful. I I'm really excited to be able to talk with you. Been speaking with Maria Elena. Christ, she is the co-owner of experience. Plus tell our listeners how to get in touch with you. And I know your trips are filling up.

Speaker 4

Now, 2025's looking strong and we just are posting this week. So the week of March. 6th 2026 dates. So we plan a good year and a half out two years out because it's international travel but no business is going. So we're excited about that, but we still have a lot of room for this year. And if you want to see more, you can see it on experience plus com and you can always e-mail us at info at experience plus com.

Speaker 2

Thank you so much for talking with me today. I'm really excited. I hope all your trips fill up. Thanks, Diane. All right, take care. My thanks to Maria Elena for speaking with me today as she said in our conversation, check out their website experience plus com and see most of the information she characterized as over sharing. After our conversation, I decided to check back with Maria Elena to see how the imminent tariffs might affect her company and bicycle tour travel in general. Here. Bonds quote. I think the exchange rate volatility is going to be the biggest concern for a company like us as well as major volatility in the market of course. So anything to do with the economy being bouncy? Is always concerning. In general, though, I think some people's appetite for travel abroad may also increase. Just have to see, she added, the chief's. Fewer people might want to

travel to the US because of the volatility. And tariff. Finally, my thanks to you for listening. I hope you enjoyed the show. One last note on our way out the door a smashing new record. And my thanks to you. Who pledged your support on behalf of the outspoken cyclist. Please remember you can find photos, links and a transcript of the show at outspokencyclist.com. You can also search and download any episode. Subscribe to the podcast on your favorite app and follow us on all our social media. Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube. I hope you have a wonderful day. Please stay safe. Stay well and remember there is always time for a ride. Bye.

Speaker 1

Thanks for joining us today on the outspoken cyclist with Diane Jenks, who welcome your thoughts and contributions on our Facebook page or visit outspokencyclist.com to leave a comment on any episode. We'll be back next week with new guests, topics, conversations and news in the world of cycling. Subscribe to the show on your favorite podcast app and you'll never miss an episode. The outspoken cyclist is a copyrighted production of DBL promotions, with the assistance of Wjcu FM Cleveland, a service of John Carroll University. Thanks again for listening. Ride safely and we'll see you next week.