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Transcript

Speaker 1

Hello and welcome to the Outspoken Cyclist. I'm your host, Diane Jenks. Thanks for tuning in today. You may have noticed a different intro theme to this episode, and that's because this is our first side story, a short conversation that highlights and complements another longer episode. In my chat with Rob Anderson of More Than a Cyclist, He mentioned the MTAC campaign in Kalamazoo, Michigan. And since it is the only one in the U.S. so far, I decided to ring up Professor Amelia Kotansky, who, along with some of her students, put the campaign together. Amelia, sharing her process, gives anyone who might be interested in putting together a campaign in his or her community some solid information. The current Kalamazoo campaign has some great images which you can see on the Mode Shift Kalamazoo Facebook page, as well as the Substack entry you're listening to or reading. The conversation with Amelia was very casual. I hope you enjoy it. So I wanted to talk with you today about MTAC and your campaigns, and that's questions like when did you run your campaigns?

Speaker 2

So the campaigns for me were connected to a course I was teaching at Kalamazoo College. So I just literally like less than a month ago retired from K officially. So yeah, we'll see what's next, but kind of family reasons and also higher ed is hard right now, but I, so I have been, I was teaching a first year seminar, so a course for students who in their first term at school called Wheels of Change. And our kind of subtitle, official or unofficial, was environmental and social justice by bike. And so we learned a lot about the history of cycling, kind of cycling as and its connection to women's suffrage, to sort of ways in which people, black Americans rode bikes to kind of evade Jim Crow laws that restricted movement and transportation. And then we did community-based work, kind of working within our Kalamazoo community to promote cycling infrastructure. there's a lot happening in Kalamazoo right now in terms of kind of reworking the streets. So we have some major one-way roads that kind of go straight through downtown that are now being the city was able to get control of those roads from the Michigan Department of Transportation and is converting them to two-way and thinking about traffic calming. And so the kind of beginning of this course, which was four years ago, really connected to a lot that was happening in Kalamazoo. part way. So I taught the course the first time and then I went on sabbatical and my sabbatical, I was in Wollongong, Australia, which my son and I were there for six months. We were living without a car and riding bikes everywhere and walked into a bike shop and saw the

More Than a Cyclist poster from the campaign in Wollongong. And turns out that I ended up meeting some of the people who were part of that campaign and you know, talking with them about, you know, how and why they were doing this work. And I thought, gosh, this would be great to bring back and have my students work on this as a project in Kalamazoo. So we did it for two years. Last fall was our second year and the year before that. So fall of 2024, I guess was our first year of doing it. And the students really worked to we worked with a partner organization called Mode Shift Kalamazoo and also obviously with the More Than A Cyclist folks in the UK who were amazing and incredibly supportive and helpful and excited about working with us. And Mode Shift, the people from Mode Shift and I kind of used our local knowledge of people in the community to kind of get a pool of models, cyclists in the community to take part trying to represent the diversity of cyclists in our community. And then the students met with the cyclists and interviewed them and then used those interviews as a way to write the short bios that kind of went along or go along with our posts. So we did the first year, I think we did 12. I'm trying to remember. I think we actually could use 11 out of the 12. One of our photos just did not turn out and it just wasn't gonna work. So unfortunately, we were able to incorporate that person into the second campaign too. And that has just been, the second one has been really slow to roll out. So I think we've posted maybe about four or five out of the 20 profiles that we have for that. So that is kind of some they just mode shift just posted a new one today. So it's still ongoing. But we're not doing a new batch this fall. So I have to really connect with everybody in the UK and my partners in Kalamazoo and figure out like, where does this go from here? Are we going to continue it? What would it look like without the students being involved too?

Speaker 1

So I have, of course, a million questions now. When you did these photographs, of course, when I talked to Rob, you have to sort of conform to whatever their image requirements are. So apparently, obviously, you did that. What did you do with your images? Were they bus cards? Were they billboards? How did you display them?

Speaker 2

Yeah. primarily social media. So Mode Shift was the kind of launcher and then we coordinated with other cycling organizations and also the college and the city of Kalamazoo to kind of repost and spread it that way. And then the folks in the UK picked up on those as well and have used some of those images too. So we also did have some posters that were put up around town, kind of downtown along in sort of stands along the street and in areas where there are bike lanes. So we did that the first time around. I think we're still in conversation about trying to get something on the side of a bus. And our Metro Transit in Kalamazoo every couple weeks or so, our city planner who we've been working closely with will write to Metro Transit and say, hey, remember how you were going to do this pilot program? And then they will sort of say, oh yeah, somebody needs to get back to you. And then we don't hear from them. So that's been

going on for a while. So I think our big challenge is like a very tiny budget. And so we've been trying to. Yeah.

Speaker 1

My question was going to be about funding because that always seems to be a problem unless you have somebody stepping up and saying, I love this project, here's a bunch of money. So far, how have you been able to fund it?

Speaker 2

So the first year we did it on like a \$0 budget, honestly. So we, I was able to, we, so Mode Shift had a photographer who had said, if you ever need any help with anything, let me know. And she did a fantastic job for us taking photos and just donating her time. In terms of editing the photos, which is also a super tricky part and kind of where we've gotten slowed down this last the Kalamazoo College Center for New Media Design has a graphic designer on staff. And so she, because it was for a class, she was willing to work with us and help us to really, students kind of talked with her about color choices, but she really did all of the Photoshop editing for that. And then, I just basically, I kind of donated my time to kind of push the rest of the project through, as did our colleagues at Mode Shift. And then the second round, I had applied for a grant from an organization called Bike Friendly Kalamazoo. which is a nonprofit in Kalamazoo. And so they gave us \$1,000 grant to do the work. And I'm trying to think, we also had a little bit of money from the Center for Civic Engagement on campus at Kalamazoo College. And interestingly, we ended up paying a photographer to work with us on the second time around. And because it just felt like we were asking for too much from our volunteer photographer and we should have stuck with her because she did a better job than the second time around. So that's a little frustrating to me. We kind of sank some money in something that didn't really pan out well for us. But that's given us enough money to also there's some talk of the city matching those funds to get something up on the bus, that kind of thing. So yeah, not a lot of cash at all. And most of this got out of people's. Yeah.

Speaker 1

So are you trying to gauge any results? Is there any kind of data gathering for this or are you just getting sort of word of mouth back on it?

Speaker 2

Yeah, we haven't done any data gathering. My background, I- Yeah, that's true.

Speaker 1

You're an English professor.

Speaker 2

I'm an English professor, right? So yeah, thinking about how we would keep track. I mean, I'm sure we can get some information on number of views of posts on social media. True. But I think that's about as far as we can go. I mean, I will say that word of mouth feedback has been really good and really positive. And I think people not only in the cycling committee, but also in the city government in Kalamazoo have really been supportive of this work and have really talked about the ways in which they think it can make a difference there. And I think because there have been so many changes to the way the roads are constructed and the way that has dovetailed with traffic calming and adding more bike lanes, it just from the first year I taught the course, which was like four years ago, to now, cycling in Kalamazoo has become the hot topic, divisive issue that it is in so many communities, where it's like everything is like, oh, blame the bike lanes or oh, blah, blah, blah. And so I think this has been a really important intervention in the kinds of I don't even want to call it debate. I mean, it's like you'll see people like a news organization will post about numbers of cars hitting cyclists. in the state of Michigan, and there will be comments like, can't wait till we get them all, right? So with that kind of rhetoric.

Speaker 1

Welcome to the world of cycling haters, you know.

Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah. And that's definitely, I think, again, this is a kind of pivotal moment for Kalamazoo in terms of really making some big changes and making that infrastructure more visible. And there have been a lot of really positive things. So definitely over the last four or five years, some really major changes that have been really positive in terms of dedicated bike lanes, protected bike lanes, all of that. And so the timing of this seems to have worked well. to really engage people in the conversation in like I really have not seen negative feedback on our posts in the ways that I've seen negative feedback about other things, right?

Speaker 1

And it seems to me that that would make some sense because you're using people who are clearly members of the community who start out as bicyclists on one side and whoever else they are on the other. How many different images? Oh, you said you had 12 and only 11 worked the first time.

Speaker 2

Yeah.

Speaker 1

So are they still cycling through these images? Are they still being posted?

Speaker 2

Yeah, so we're on our second set right now and we have a, I think I'm trying to remember numbers here. We have about 18 in the second round, 18 to 20, depending on how we sort some things out. And I think we've Either #4 or #5 was just posted. I think it's #4 that just got posted of those. So some of those are still in the editing process and others. are kind of queued up, ready to go. The first round we did one per week for 12 weeks. We basically started during bike week in Kalamazoo in May and then took that as long as it went throughout the summer. This year, again, for various logistical reasons involving everybody being a volunteer, it took us longer to get started and they've been the pacing has been a little bit different. Yeah.

Speaker 1

So I want to pivot to the National Bike Summit coming up because this call for, you know, requests for sessions. Do you think that the League of American Bicyclists would benefit from having a session about MTAC?

Speaker 2

I feel like I'm answering that without a lot of context in terms of what tends to happen at these at the summit.

Speaker 1

A real quick explanation. So it's delegations from every state. There's a leader from each delegation. And the final day, everybody goes up to Capitol Hill and calls on their respective Congress people and senators. You actually make those appointments, knock on those doors and sit down, usually with one of their aides. You don't often sit down with the actual congressperson because they have people dedicated to transportation or to health or to whatever that is in that office. It's a pretty successful thing. It's been going on for years, but they have these in from the first day, I think it's only three days total. They have these breakout sessions and one of the sessions it seems to me might be having an MTAC campaign in your area to work with your local advocacy organization. And it just seems that if it was put together in a somewhat generic way, but using either your images or MTAC's images and maybe some slides or whatever, you could get enough people across the country interested to actually have a campaign that goes much farther and wider than just Kalamazoo. Australia did a great job. Portugal seems to be doing well, according to Rob. And of course, the UK. I mean, now we're talking about gas station, they call them petrol, you know, the whatever it is, the thing you put into your gas tank and get a picture on it. They've got bus cards, they've got, you know, they're all kinds of things. So I'm just wondering if you think it's something that with some help you could put together as a possible proposal as a breakout session that you would want to maybe go to Washington for a couple of days in March.

Speaker 2

I mean, that sounds fantastic. And I, again, I don't have a lot of answers in terms of, how would communities get funding for this, or, you know, maybe this is the organization that provides the funding, right?

Speaker 1

Well, I certainly work with you because advocacy, because fundraising is, I know it's probably from your perspective, really difficult. From my perspective, it isn't. I see it as something that every fairly large community like Cleveland has bike Cleveland and it has discretionary money or you have there's a person in our mayor's office who is specifically bike and ped and they have discretionary money or you go to foundations in Cleveland. There's the Cleveland Foundation, the Gund Foundation. There are a whole bunch of possible options that if you got six major markets in the country to do it, that would be a successful campaign, I think. And I think you have Rob, of course, and the MTAC people in the UK. And maybe what you do is find somebody who'll give us a ticket and fly them over here to give that presentation too. I'm just thinking that we could make the proposal and if it got accepted, then we could like bang our heads together and figure out how to actually do it.

Speaker 2

Okay.

Speaker 1

Would you be interested in it?

Speaker 2

Absolutely. I mean, again, for me, it was such a powerful thing walking into that bike shop and seeing that and saying, whoa, this is what we need in Kalamazoo, especially at this moment when things seem so polarized because, again, that the image is designed to break down your idea of the polarized cyclists and humans in ways that directly speak, I feel like, to the moment that we're experiencing here in the US broadly. So yeah, I mean, I would be happy to work on that and to take part in that. I think it'd be fantastic if it was like I've felt in the last few months, you know, as I'm like, well, I don't have students anymore and like, well, I have, you know. Oh, you're not teaching at all? I mean, not right now, no. Oh, so you have some time?

Speaker 1

That would be so cool.

Speaker 2

I do have some time, yeah. So this would be a fantastic next kind of, you know, not to just leave this project behind, yeah.

Speaker 1

Right, right, right, right. So you're living in Ann Arbor right now?

Speaker 2

Yes.

Speaker 1

Okay. So I will probably be coming through there at some point. My daughter and her husband decided to move to Canada this year. He's Canadian, so I can't really fault them. That was an agreement when they first got married. It's been 23 years, so I'm like, okay. So they live there and I think I can come right through Ann Arbor going up to Toronto or that way.

Speaker 2

Yeah, I think so. Pretty close.

Speaker 1

Yeah, close enough. I'll tell you what, let me work a little bit with their, I mean, they have a deadline of Sunday and I think I can flesh it out enough to at least make the proposal and then we could, if they come back and go, this is a really cool idea because I have all of the images from Rob, I have all of their research. He just sent, it's really funny that he sent it to me yesterday and yesterday is when I started editing our conversation. I don't know how I said, wow, we're on the same page here. And then you have your stuff. And because you had a successful campaign here in the States, I think that would be really interesting. We've also had some really high profile deaths here that really this whole thing needs to be addressed. It's just horrible.

Speaker 2

It is horrible. I mean, I obviously I love to ride myself. I have a 15 year old who wants to be a professional cyclist one day and you know, Yeah, so he's really actually we've been in Cleveland a bit because he's really interested in Cleveland Cycling Academy and he would really like to be on that team. And so we.

Speaker 1

That's out of case.

Speaker 2

It's a no, it's like a independent organization that is like a junior development and U23 development team and they have people from. all over, at least all over the Midwest, he's really interested in road racing. And so I'm terrified every day when he goes out, he'll go out mostly with Ann Arbor Vello Club, our local club for rides, which you would think would make you feel a little bit safer, but the whole Millikan incident, I mean, it's just been.

Speaker 1

Exactly.

Speaker 2

It's bad.

Speaker 1

It's really bad. I'm glad I don't have children growing up right now. Mine's all grown up and gone. So, well, this has just been wonderful. Let me just add something in. So we are We've been speaking with Amelia Kutansky. She did an MTAC campaign when she was a professor in Kalamazoo. She's in Ann Arbor now. And we are going to try and put some MTAC stuff together for maybe for the bike summit in March. I haven't been in many years. It's time for me to go back. I've done a whole summer of safety oriented podcasts I've done. This is like my, I think MTAC is my fifth. Peter Wilborn, the head of Bike Law, who actually has the Milligan cases. They're ready to start, you know, I hope they just string this guy up by his toenails. It's just unbelievable how horrible that particular nine cyclists getting mowed down so. Thank you. I'm really excited that maybe we can make this happen. And since you have a little bit of spare time, maybe we can do it together. And this is a good, this is a pretty good medium. I think Zoom works, yes.

Speaker 2

Yeah, it does. Would you like me to send you some of our images from?

Speaker 1

Absolutely would. It's outspoken cyclist at gmail.com. Well, you know.

Speaker 2

OK, I'll just respond to your message.

Speaker 1

That'd be great.

Speaker 2

And I'm thinking, I'm trying to think. I think to see the most recent, I just saw it on Facebook today. Let me just make sure I know. It's the Mode Shift Kalamazoo account. So Mode Shift is one word. And I think they have There's a private one and a public one. Obviously, this was on the public account.

Speaker 1

Oh, I've got it. It's Francis.

Speaker 2

Francis. Yeah, that's.

Speaker 1

What a beautiful image.

Speaker 2

Yeah, he's great. And then, you know, you can hopefully see.

Speaker 1

Reader, thinker, classmate, a young person. That's even better with us. Was that a soccer ball? I know nothing about this.

Speaker 2

Yeah. I'm a golf fan.

Speaker 1

I just love watching. All these crazy soccer people. Sun, athlete, reader, thinker, classmate. Beautiful image. Was this from your photographer?

Speaker 2

This was from our second photographer. Yeah.

Speaker 1

Did a good job on this one. This is really nice. Yeah.

Speaker 2

Thank you. And then you can see that the students kind of drafted at least the little bio that goes with Francis's.

Speaker 1

Oh, I see him there. Francis is an elementary school student who enjoys playing video games. Awesome, awesome, awesome, awesome. Bikes around his neighborhood and to the farmers market. That sounds good too. Well, thanks, Amelia. We'll talk again soon. Absolutely. And have a wonderful afternoon.

Speaker 2

You too.

Speaker 1

Thank you.

Speaker 2

Thank you. Bye.

Speaker 1

My thanks to Amelia for joining me and giving us a glimpse into the MTAC campaign she and her students produced. Please share this episode with others, especially any advocacy organizations in your area. I put together the proposal for the upcoming Bike Summit in March, and as of this episode, I haven't heard back. For more information about MTAC, log on to morethanacyclist.org and to see the current Kalamazoo images, check out Mode Shift Kalamazoo on Facebook. Thank you for listening. Remember to subscribe to my Substack for more Side Story episodes as well as regular podcast and YouTube features. I hope you have a great day. Bye bye.