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Transcript

Speaker 1

It's time for the Outspoken Cyclist, your 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 Jenks.

Speaker 2

Hello and welcome to the Outspoken Cyclist. I'm your host, Diane Jenks. Thanks for tuning in today. First off, I need to apologize to both my guests today, Heather Grant from Talbot Thrive, and my previous two guests, Brian Bortz and Susie Lawrence from the Pan-Ohio Hope Ride. So I mixed up the order in which I was going to upload them. Oops. However, both organizations are super worthy, and I'm happy to have been able to highlight them this time of year. In addition, I mistakenly said that I'd never, ever covered the Pan-Ohio Hope Ride. Oops again, I did indeed cover it. was 10 years ago. I feel as if I was able to remember so much more then than I do now. But moving on, let's talk about Talbot Thrive and Heather Grant. Heather is the executive director of the organization in Talbot County, Maryland. Our conversation covers the location, how she became executive director, the organization itself, and some really interesting programs it offers. I was especially interested in a couple of things. One, having the resources to hire a second person for some of the nitty gritty paperwork, which is something she needs desperately, and two, the cycling without aid chapter, an organization with which I was not familiar, but when I looked it up, think it might be something you would like to earmark for Talbot Thrive. We'll explain how the earmarks work toward the end of our conversation. Hello, Heather. Welcome to The Outspoken Cyclist. Thanks for being my guest today. How are you?

Speaker 3

I'm great. Thanks for having me.

Speaker 2

Oh, it's my pleasure. And how's the weather in Maryland? Is it as beautiful? as it is here in Cleveland.

Speaker 3

It is beautiful sunny fall day, getting a little crisp in the air and leaves are changing. So it's pretty nice right now.

Speaker 2

Yeah, I think we're almost through it, but it's been super warm and nice and yeah, I like it. I hope it doesn't go away.

Speaker 3

Yeah, good biking weather.

Speaker 2

You are gonna be my very first episode this season about nonprofit gift giving. And so we've always highlighted things in the past like Rails to Trails and League of American Bicyclists But when I put out the call this year, I really wanted to highlight some smaller organizations that are doing some really great work, and it sounds like you are. So I'd like a little bit of background about you. have an interesting background, actually, and how you came to be the executive director of Talbot Thrive, and then we'll talk about what that is.

Speaker 3

Sure. My background is mainly in marketing and communications. I worked for a publication in Annapolis, Maryland called Chesapeake Family for about 10 years, an art director. And then I kind of migrated to the marketing field. I used to do some marketing work for the Department of the Navy, also in Annapolis. But all during that time, I've been an avid cyclist. So I was looking for a position that would kind of help merge my passion for cycling with also what I was doing in my work life. And so I was lucky enough to be at the beginning of Tall to Thrive, a board member, and then I transitioned to president of the board. And about three years ago, we really decided that we needed a full-time executive director. So I stepped into that role.

Speaker 2

So are you a veteran?

Speaker 3

Okay.

Speaker 2

It was just a curiosity question reading your background. I wonder if she was a veteran. So Talbot County is in Maryland, but tell us where in the state it's situated and what you'd like us to know about Talbot County.

Speaker 3

Sure. So Talbot County is actually part of the Delmarva Peninsula, which includes Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia. That's where that acronym comes from. And we are a county on the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay. So when people talk about the eastern shore of Maryland, that's what they mean. So there are nine counties that are part of that eastern shore area of Maryland. It's a very tourist driven area. Just in Talbot County alone, we have over 600 miles of shorelines. So it's very focused on boating and fishing and the oyster and crab industry. We also have a lot of tourists who come to this area. St. Michael's and Oxford and Easton are some very quaint villages that people just love to come to visit. We have a lot of festivals that bring in a lot of people. The biggest town in Talbot County is Easton, which is where I live and where Talbot Thrive is based. We have about 37,000 residents of Talbot County. So that's it in a nutshell. I mean, it's a very beautiful place to ride bikes. So we do get a lot of bike tourism companies come in and do single day or multi-day tours, kind of starting in Easton and exploring the whole area. It's very flat, a lot of farmland. So people will really enjoy kind of that, being able to enjoy the waterfront areas and also being able to enjoy the quiet country roads that just kind of wind through farmland.

Speaker 2

So you used the word flat and I'm sure a lot of ears just perked up going, oh, I would like that, but it does sound beautiful. How much? Well, we'll get to that. I want to know about your trails, but we'll get to that. So let me reintroduce you and then we're going to talk about Talbot Thrive and what it is and how it started and what its goals are because you have some really interesting things on your site and we are absolutely going to link them on our Outspoken Cyclist page. So I'm speaking with Heather Grant. She is the executive director of Talbot Thrive. She is the first of our series coming up for year-end gift giving. So if you're interested in looking for worthy organizations, I think this might be one of them. So what is Talbot Thrive? When did it start and what are some of the goals of the organization?

Speaker 3

Sure. We started back in 2021. As a lot of communities, we had a growth in the number of people that were using bicycles to get around during that time frame. And we had a few high profile deaths on our roads, one of which was the brother of the owner of our local bike shop. And that kind of spurred some conversations between myself and a few other people in the area who were avid cyclists who might live in some more rural areas of the county basically saying, we don't feel safe riding on some of these roads. Is there anything that we can do? So that's kind of how Talba Thrive came to be. And we really wanted to rope in the pedestrian and infrastructure aspect that as well. We didn't really want to just concentrate on bicyclists. So our goal is basically to make Talba County a safer place for anyone who wants to run, ride or roll in community. So that's kind of one of our taglines. So that was about six years ago. And we kind of limped along for a few years without any full-time employee. We did have some interim consultants kind of helping us out, kind of determine what our mission and do some strategic planning. But

we kind of felt that we needed an employee who was on the ball full-time. So I started in that role about three years ago. And from that initial strategic planning conversations, a lot of our programming has grown organically out of some of those conversations. we want more kids to be able to ride their bikes to school, but it's a chicken and the egg situation where we just don't feel it's safe to put them on the roads right now. So what can we do to change that? So we've really been working with the town on a complete streets plan, the county on a Vision Zero plan. And we've really taken an active role in both of those processes.

Speaker 2

Yeah, so I have this sort of aggravating thing going on where I don't see parents teaching their kids to ride. Some of it's fear, some of it is kids are doing other things right now. And my husband and I have been in the bike business decades. And it's a conversation right now that who is actually riding bikes, who will continue to ride bikes, e-bikes and e-motos are turning things into a whole different kind of bicycling industry. So, yeah, that's really tough. So you say something about the transformative power of trails, and I thought that was a really interesting commentary on your site. Tell me what you mean by that. and how Talbot Thrive is sort of embodying that.

Speaker 3

Sure. We're also part of the Maryland Eastern Shore Trail Network, which is a group of people from the nine counties in this part of Maryland. And what we're looking at with them is, you know, the Eastern Shore of Maryland has 30% of the landmass of the state of Maryland, but we only have 9% of road separated trails. And so we have one very popular rail trail, which is right in the center of Easton, which is the largest municipality. And we really see how that brings together our community. It's only three miles. It runs right through the center of a very historic district. And we just see people really using it, not just for transportation, for riding, skateboarding, walking, but we also see people using it for recreation and for their health. And we have a lot of offices that are adjacent to this trail and you can go out at lunchtime and you really see people out there, they're getting their workout in and Talbot Thrive has kind of, some of our programming has grown out of that. We now have a running and walking club that meets twice a week on the trail. So we really saw the power of what that three miles has done for the community. And we really are trying to look at other places in Talbot County and like I said, with that other organization all over the Eastern Shore as places that we can expand trails. And we have a lot of abandoned and rail banked lines in this area. So we're kind of working towards where can we make the most impact and really push for more trails because Like I said, we're a very rural area and we have our county is divided in the middle by a dangerous vulnerable Rd. user corridor. And so we have people on one side of that highway and people on the other side of the highway and they're constantly crossing to get services. And there's really only one section right now that the state highway is going to look at and do some sidewalks and crosswalks and pedestrian activated signals to make that section a little safer. But what we see is if we

can create trails and safer ways to people to go over that highway or under that highway and connect communities, then it makes for a much more healthy community and it allows people to really get outside, improve their mental health, and also use it as transportation. So it's transformative in a number of ways.

Speaker 2

So three miles with that many people seems like it could get pretty crowded.

Speaker 3

It actually really doesn't, you know, it's a small town and everybody, you know, loves it as an amenity. And there's some days on Saturdays where you might, you know, run into a few people, but It doesn't, and we're also dealing with the problems of different devices on that trail. And we're working with the town of Easton on some code changes to make sure that, we don't have any fast emotos on it. We're going to be helping them implement a speed limit and doing an educational campaign. But the big project that we're focused on is this Frederick Douglass Rail Trail, which kind of brings together not just the recreation, but also the history that's part of this community that we live in.

Speaker 2

Let's take a short break and then I want to get right back to trails and find out about this Frederick Douglass Trail and a couple of the others you mentioned on your site. We're speaking with Heather Grant. She is the executive director of Talbot Thrive She's in Eastern Maryland. Sounds like a wonderful area. And we will be right back. You're listening to The Outspoken Cyclist. We are back on the Outspoken Cyclist. We're going to continue our conversation with Heather Grant. So you mentioned the Frederick Douglass Trail and there are several trails that are mentioned on your site. Give us some highlights about a few of your trails and about what people might see if they came out to the area and schlepped their bikes along.

Speaker 3

Sure. I mean, right now, like I mentioned, we have the three mile long Easton Rail Trail, which actually had a few extensions added to it. But mainly in Talbot County, that's our only option right now for trails. We're working on a project in Oxford, Maryland, which is eventually going to be called the Oyster Trail, kind of a nod to the history of the area. But that trail will go from the historic town of Oxford to a conservation park, which is very well used in that community. And we're really pushing right now to work with the state on getting the design completed for the Frederick Douglass Rail Trail, which will be a 10-mile trail extending from the town of Easton out to the Frederick Douglass Park on the Tuckahoe River, which is actually one mile from where he was born. So we're really advocating for that and trying to work with the local community to get buy-in on that project while it's under design right now with the state.

Speaker 2

Oh, so you actually have some movement on that?

Speaker 3

Yes, the line was rail banked and the state of Maryland received a $4 million federal grant to work on the design. So that's in progress right now.

Speaker 2

Oh, they didn't take it away from you.

Speaker 3

No, they didn't take it away from us.

Speaker 2

That was a nasty comment and meant to be one. It's not a DEI trail, sorry. Let me ask you about the East Coast Greenway. Does that come anywhere near you?

Speaker 3

It does not, actually. It skips the Eastern Shore mainly because the difficulties of bridges that, you know.

Speaker 2

Yeah, I'm an advisory board member, so I always like to know where it's going. And I haven't written much of it, if at all, actually. So you have some programs and events that sound really interesting. Just synopsize a couple of your programs. What I'm trying to do is give highlights of your organization so people will go, yeah, I want to support that.

Speaker 3

Sure. Our most successful event in the last three years have been our rolling rodeos. And we started that, and we didn't really want to call them bike rodeos because we really wanted kids to come with their scooters and their skateboards and bikes and any sort of wheels that they use. So we started out doing a very public rolling rodeo at one of the elementary schools. They have a resource fair every year in October. And then we kind of expanded that program, and now we're working with five elementary schools in the county and trying to get all fourth graders through the program. And we have a Maryland highway safety grant to help out with helmets. And we hire a consultant to come in and work with us to set up a course. But basically, we go to elementary schools and we take over the parking lot for the day or the half a day. And we chalk paint a mini road system just like a traffic garden and we get the kids, all the 4th graders to come out and they all get a free helmet. They get a ABCs of bike safety and then they're allowed to be on riding the bikes on the course. And that's been a great program. We're in year three of that. And like I said, we received some great money to continue that. So our goal is to get as many Talbot County kids through that program as we can. And out of that has kind of grown our free bike matching program because what we found is that

not only did about half the kids not know how to ride a bike and actually end up learning that day that they came out, but a lot of them wanted a bike and didn't have one at home. So as part of that program, we get the kids to fill out a card or their parents to fill out a card or a form on the website. And then we do a bike matching program. I take used bikes and we have a volunteer who fixes them up. And then we get them back out into the community, or if we have a need for specific size for a kid who's been waiting a while, we'll go out and buy a new bike. And then we give them the free helmet, we give them the safety card, and that's been a pretty successful program. We gave away over 50 bikes last year, and we're on track to give about 75 bikes away this year. That's a great program. That's awesome. Yeah, what we've found is that there's a lot of people who have kids' bikes that their kids have just outgrown and they don't know what to do with it. And bringing them to the Goodwill or something, they'll sit there and sometimes they'll throw the lump on Facebook Marketplace and I'm just watching and I find ones that I think that are can be saved and we go get them up for a minimal price and I have a volunteer who can work on them, make sure that they're working and we get them back out into the community.

Speaker 2

Do you have a full-time grant writer? Or are you in? It's a lot of work. People don't understand how difficult it is to apply for grants. They're very.

Speaker 3

Yes, and the administration of them is too.

Speaker 2

Oh, I'm sure.

Speaker 3

As I say this week when I'm trying to finish all my reports for the federal grants that wrapped up at the end of September, so.

Speaker 2

I guess that's what we're going to talk about next, and that is the most important things about your organization and the work you do that you'd like to get across to listeners to encourage them to maybe offer, I assume, that you take donations.

Speaker 3

Yes, we do. We survive on donations.

Speaker 2

Okay.

Speaker 3

Yeah, I mean, in addition to my salary, like I said, we have a lot of programming that we would like to expand upon. I'd love to be able to hire a program manager to help We run a lot of these programming programs so that I can kind of work more on the advocacy side of it. I do spend a lot of time going to Annapolis, which is the state capital, to talk to our legislators. We're not lobbyists, but we do stay in communication with those folks who are deciding kind of where the money goes. So yeah, being able to hire someone would be very helpful to help us run the organization and be more streamlined and being able to expand the programming that we do. We would love to open up a Cycling Without Age chapter in Talbot County because we have an aging population and we think that program would do very well here. We haven't been able to find specific funding for that. We were very lucky in that we have a member of my board who has a family foundation and supported us from the beginning, but he's sunsetting that foundation. So, you know, the need is greater than it was before for us to bring in donations, either from individuals or corporate sponsorships.

Speaker 2

Can somebody offer you a donation that is earmarked for a specific program?

Speaker 3

Yes.

Speaker 2

Okay, that's okay too.

Speaker 3

Yeah, and we've had a lot of success with our free bike matching program. I actually have a donor and he'll say, you know, touch base me every six months if you need me to get bikes for kids. So I think sometimes when people are donating to a nonprofit such as ours where it's a little bit, might be a little bit confusing as to where the money goes, I think sometimes they like to see a very concrete thing that they're donating to. So our free bike matching program has been one of those things that we have a separate landing page and people can go and I say, okay, if you give us this amount of money, we can buy this many bikes. And they can see something concrete that they're donating to, which I think helps some people understand the need.

Speaker 2

Well, the last thing we need to know is to let listeners, or we need to say is to let listeners know how they can find out more, read about everything you're doing, and then whip out those credit cards.

Speaker 3

Sure.

Speaker 2

Or checkbooks.

Speaker 3

Or checkbooks. So the website is TalbotThrive.org. And all the information that you'll need is right there.

Speaker 2

Well, you know what? It's been a pleasure to speak with you. Clearly, you have a great vision for just this small area of the country. But I think it's important that these smaller organizations are highlighted in a way that somebody might come to Easton and they'll go, I remember Diane talking to this person, and I'm going to ride that three-mile turn. or the Frederick Douglass Trail when it's done. Thank you so much for talking with me. I hope you have a great holiday season coming up, and we'll check back in with you in the spring and see how we did.

Speaker 3

I appreciate it so much. Thank you for having me.

Speaker 2

Take care. My thanks to Heather for taking time to speak with me today. While we were talking, I kept thinking about the terrain in locale, and so, of course, had to look it up. It sounds like a really nice place to live and bike. If you are interested in learning more about Talbot Thrive, learning about any of their programs, or making a donation to the organization, log on to talbotthrive.org. Remember that you can earmark a donation for a specific program if you wish too. So for more links, photos, and a written transcript of this and all episodes, log on to outspokencyclist.com. You can subscribe to the podcast on your favorite app and check out my Substack for extended commentary and the link to the video version of our shows too. Coming up on our next episode is a conversation with Pete Piccolo, executive director of Bike Colorado. Once again, I screwed up the order of the conversations, but maybe it doesn't matter since they are all such good organizations. It also turns out that Pete is a super interesting guy, as are all of our guests actually, and he's got some spot-on observations about advocacy and how it works or doesn't work. If you live in or love to visit Colorado, This might just be the worthy organization for your year-end gift-giving dollars. Thank you for listening. I hope you have a great Thanksgiving. Please stay safe, stay well, and remember there is always time for a ride. Bye-bye.

Speaker 1

Thanks for joining us today on The Outspoken Cyclist with Diane Jenks. We welcome your thoughts and contributions on our Facebook page or visit outspokencyclist.com to leave a comment on any episode. We will be back next week with new guests, topics,

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