

## Reality Check

*1993*

My first day as Portland's Bicycle Program Coordinator finds me slotted into a meat-locker-sized, burnt-orange cubicle, identical to the ones on my right and left. Natural light does not penetrate this part of the building.

One cubicle over, a blond man is yelling in a faux-Australian accent into the phone. Apparently yesterday's rugby match was highly entertaining. "No, mate, he din't break his collarbone, just dislocated his bloody shoulder! Popped the sucker right back in!"

I'm working my way through an inch-high stack of forms. Suddenly, a woman with short spiky hair and flowing fire-engine-red dress is in my space. She is communications director Loretta, sent to tell me that a local advocacy group, the Bicycle Transportation Alliance (BTA), has filed a lawsuit against the city. She barks at me, "I'm telling you right here and now. Whatever you do, do NOT speak to the media!"

"Um, OK," I respond. Since I have no idea what she's talking about, it seems wise to agree.

I stick out my hand. "I'm Mia Birk. Nice to meet you!?"

She explains that the bicycle group insists that bike lanes – marked bicycle-only lanes on streets – are required by law. The city, my employer, has refused to mark bike lanes on a road adjacent to the prominent new Portland Trail Blazers basketball arena.

Since my job is supposedly to improve conditions for people who ride – or want to ride – bikes, I ask innocently, "Why aren't we installing bike lanes?"

She glares at me and tattoos her phone number on my hand. "They talk to me, not you, got it?" Clearly a command, not a question. She storms out, sending my stack of paperwork flying. I quietly gather the raining paper. Heads pop up from the surrounding cubicles.

"She's high-spirited," notes the rugby player. "You don't want to get on her shit list."

“Great,” I think, “just great. One hour on the job and already floundering.”



“Ready to ride?” Rob Burchfield asks a few days later. Skinny as a stick and sharp as a tack, Rob is the city’s lead traffic engineer. He often rides his bike to work 15 miles one-way from his farm in rural Washington County, where on the weekends you’ll find him behind the wheel of a tractor or fixing the chicken coop.

“Always!” I grab my helmet in excitement.

He’s taking me on my first Portland bicycling adventure. I’m lucky it wasn’t my last.

We wait under the portico of the government-function Portland Building, whose front door is protected by an enormous statue of a ready-to-attack warrior goddess holding a trident. It’s hard to imagine that this building’s design – swaddled in blue tile and a big red bow, making it resemble the inside of a gift-wrapped restroom – was award-winning at the time.

The Bicycle Program’s stalwart, Jeff Smith, joins us. A slender but towering man, Jeff’s a cartographer by training, calm as a morning in the country, and a take-no-prisoners croquet player.

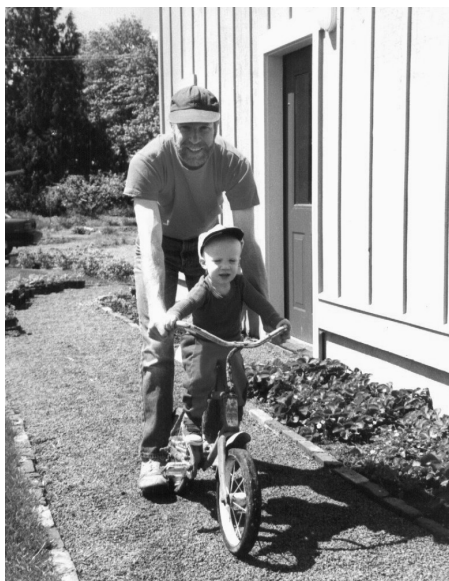
We roll out for North Portland, an annexed suburb characterized by wide, flat streets and an older, working-class population. We ride into a four-mountain day – Mount Hood to the east, and St. Helens, Adams and Rainier to the north – all demanding the attention of us city dwellers. We set off on reasonably calm downtown streets. I feel like I’m on holiday, with these million-dollar views and a light breeze in my face.

The narrow but functional sidewalks of the Broadway Bridge take us to the east side, where we take two right turns onto Interstate Avenue heading north. That’s when things get interesting.

A couple miles of this gritty, high-speed road and my nerves are starting to fray. Then Jeff and Rob stick out their left arms to indicate we’re turning onto a steeply ascending four-lane highway.

“Are you kidding?” I think, as they make a break for it, quickly merging into the left lane. I nervously follow their lead.

Grunting our way up North Greeley, we hug the edge of the road and slow



*Traffic engineer Rob at home  
on the farm with his son Cody.*

to six or seven miles per hour. Like a swimmer flailing in a powerboat wake, I grasp my handlebars to steady myself from 18-wheeler wind blasts.

After the crest, we execute another left-turn-across-traffic maneuver onto Willamette Boulevard, a quiet street lining a bluff overlooking the Willamette River's shipyards. I breathe a little easier, sip from my water bottle, let my shoulders relax.

The all-too-brief mile of calm is replaced five minutes later by a solid line of traffic as we approach the University of Portland, home to one of the country's top women's college soccer teams. I wonder if the players' biggest concern is crossing Willamette to get to practice.

"Willamette is a very popular road for touring cyclists," Jeff explains as we stop for a break. He and Rob have been trying to add bike lanes to Willamette in response to a cavalcade of complaints about safety.

"Students and local residents in particular are demanding improvements."

"As they should be," I concur.

"But it's been hard," he sighs. "Folks around here don't like the idea of bike lanes at all."

I look up the wide, straight expanse of asphalt. "I don't understand. Just narrow the existing lanes. Or remove one side of parking. Looks like no one parks here anyway. Isn't it a no-brainer?"

Rob and Jeff shake their heads, and Rob's bony shoulders slump in weariness. "It's not about brains, it's about emotion. You'll see at the public meeting next week."

Jeff gets up off the grass. "Let's keep riding."

We squeeze along parked cars. Motorists impatiently hover behind us, then gun it to pass. We reach a narrow two-lane bridge, with not an inch of space for bicyclists or pedestrians. It's been stressful until this point. Now it's white-knuckle terrifying. The bridge dumps us onto bona fide industrial highway where no one drives below 60.

I've been gritting my teeth, trying to be brave, but I can't take it anymore. I let loose.

"What is this? You call this bicycling? We're going to die out here!"

Rob looks back to see if something has happened to me.

"Where is the trail? The bike lanes? This is crazy! In Washington, D.C., I biked on a path in Rock Creek Park, not on highways with 18-wheelers." My ranting gets their attention, and we stop. Trucks and cars fly by in a steady stream.

Jeff and Rob look at each other. "Um... well, yeah," Rob says. "This is why we



*A typical Portland road in the early 1990s.*

hired you.” He tries a gentle smile and touches my arm with long piano-playing fingers.

By the most generous accounting, Portland at the time has but a few dozen miles of disconnected bike lanes, green “bike route” signs on a few neighborhood streets, dead-end paths, highway shoulders and way-too-narrow bridge sidewalks. Better than most cities, but nowhere close to where we need to be. Nothing resembling an attractive bikeway network. It’s like so-called roadway networks from the late 1800s – unpaved, unsafe, incomplete, dysfunctional. If my job is to fix this, I’ve sure got my work cut out for me.

I spew profanities. They wait me out. I turn my bike around.

“I’ve seen enough.” I sound like Ebenezer Scrooge to the ghosts in “A Christmas Carol.” “Let’s go.”

What was I thinking? That Portland was already like Amsterdam or Copenhagen? Bicycling conditions are deplorable, scary. I wouldn’t send my worst enemies onto these roads.



Back at headquarters, I try to shake it off on my way to a promising-sounding meeting. Rob leads me through the cubicle maze to a small windowless conference room, where we join engineers Stephen, Mike and Ben. They roll out maps and pass around data sheets.

“Four streets are under consideration.” Rob begins. “Beaverton-Hillsdale Highway, Southeast 7th, Northeast Broadway/Weidler and downtown Southwest Broadway.”

One of these could be the first major roadway in Portland retooled with bike lanes. I’m practically jumping up and down in my seat with anticipation.

“Well, we definitely can’t do Broadway/Weidler,” Mike states. He rolls out a map. The bulk of each one-way street has four lanes plus on-street parking on both sides. He launches into a speech about traffic “capacity,” levels of congestion, peak-hour flow and the like. I understand almost none of it, but I get that it means keeping car traffic moving is very, very important.



*Northeast Broadway, 1993 (compare with photos on pages 47 and top of 64).*

Stephen chimes in. “The businesses aren’t going to like it, especially if we touch their parking.”

Wow, eight lanes of travel and four lanes of parking. Seems like an awful lot of space for cars. But what do I know? I keep my mouth shut.

“Let’s move on to Southwest Broadway downtown.” Rob unrolls another map.

“It’s on the paving list, so that would be an opportune time to install bike lanes.”

He pulls out a ruler and measures. “Fifty feet. Eight feet of parking on each side, three 12-foot-wide travel lanes. Pretty tight. Not sure how we could squeeze in a bike lane.”

Ben shakes his head. “No way. We’ve already got traffic signals timed for a slow speed. Bicyclists can just ride in the middle of the lane.”

“Excuse me,” I interject. “Ride in the middle of the lane? Isn’t Broadway a little steep? I’m pretty fit, but I can’t keep up with the signals.”

He looks at me for a long moment.

“The downtown businesses will hate it,” he says. “See these hotel parking zones? See all these driveways?” He points to half a dozen parking garages. “You can’t expect motorists to yield to cyclists when they turn into a parking garage. This is a nonstarter.”

We then dismiss another road, Southeast 7th – four lanes plus parking – as similarly problematic and controversial.

Ben turns our attention to Beaverton-Hillsdale Highway. “This one is do-able,” he states emphatically.

It only needs a marked fog line to create a shoulder that can double as a bike lane. No parking need be removed on this puppy. Motorists turning across the bike lane into driveways and onto side streets don’t bother him this time. Neither does the fact that we’ll have to drop the bike lane where the highway divides, forcing cyclists to merge left across fast-moving traffic.

They quickly reach consensus that this is the best choice because no inconvenient trade-offs for the motoring public are required. Who cares about a few safety trade-offs for bicyclists? They high-five each other and walk out cheerful.

I, on the other hand, leave confused and glum. It’s better than nothing, I console myself. Then why am I not satisfied? Three perfectly good candidates for bike lanes were dismissed. Besides Rob, do any of these men ride a bike? Loretta’s warning about the Bicycle Transportation Alliance lawsuit floats into my head. No wonder they’re suing the city for refusing to put in bike lanes.

My impression had been that the bulk of the job would be convincing a skeptical public that bicycling is a viable means of transportation. Apparently, my job is also to evolve the bureaucracy, which, like every American transportation department, is almost entirely dedicated to moving and parking motor vehicles.



On our way to the Willamette Boulevard public meeting, Jeff and I retrace our North Portland bike-route ordeal.

It isn’t any more comfortable the second time.

At previous meetings, Jeff and my predecessor Krys Ochia had tried to explain that bike lanes would reduce travel speeds and improve safety. Opponents had shouted them down.

A series of negative letters and editorials in a neighborhood newspaper

decided the bike lanes under the guise of safety concerns related to the relatively high driving speed of 35 to 50 mph. In response, Jeff and Kryz suggested bundling the bike lane proposal with speed bumps to reduce travel speeds to 30 mph. This infuriated residents even further.

Opponents formed a group called “Save Our Boulevard.” Their flyers compared the bumps and lines of the city’s proposal to the barbed wire of the Berlin Wall and labeled the city as a communist regime intent on commandeering people’s cars. Tonight’s public meeting is an attempt to clear the air and combat the misinformation.

Crystal Atkins, one of my new colleagues, meets us at the door of a 50-person classroom she’s emptied to accommodate the expected crowd. Redheaded, solidly built, a hard-working horse farmer in her private life, her work life consists of corralling a wickedly diverse herd of opinionated residents. On the one hand, Crystal, a so-called “traffic calming specialist,” fields a never-ending stream of requests for speed bumps and circles to slow auto traffic on neighborhood streets. On the other hand, she calmly absorbs fervent opposition to the city’s attempts to rein in unsafe driving habits. I’m grateful she’s here. Her horse-whisperer skills will help us rein in the wilder broncos.

A fact: The faster we drive, the more dangerous our daily existence. And unless we’re forced to slow down, we don’t.

Crystal, Jeff and I position ourselves around the room. I stand by a poster showing photos of bike lanes filled with happy pedaling people. Fire captain Dave Bellucci arrives and introduces himself to Crystal. They chat for a few moments, and he parks himself at the door.

Crystal whispers to me, “We’re in trouble.”

“What do you mean?” I whisper back.

She nods over to where Dave is standing with a woman my age who looks like she is about to cry. In a flat, somber tone she explains: “The Fire Bureau doesn’t like this project.”

I shimmy close to the door. A young Chinese-American woman pushing a 2-year-old in a stroller stops at the sign-in table.

Dave leans in close enough for her to smell his breath. “Do you know it only takes two minutes for a house to catch fire?”

“Excuse me?” The woman looks up to see a clean-shaven, buff, uniformed man with fire in his eyes.

“Where is your child’s bedroom? It takes us another 40 seconds to reach his room.” He clears his throat.

“These speed bumps will slow down our response time. Your child’s life is at stake.”



Newspaper headlines express the state of progress at the time.



My mouth drops open in shock. This guy works for the city, right? Aren't we on the same team?

The mom picks up her toddler and cradles him close to her heart. The tyke struggles to get down to the plate of cookies on the table.

I follow the woman to one of the posters and engage her in conversation. "Speed bumps and bike lanes will bring travel speeds down below 30 mph," I explain. "This will significantly reduce the number and severity of auto crashes."

I want to tell her that the Fire Bureau spends the bulk of their time as first responders to traffic crashes, not fires, but I never get the chance.

She looks at me like I have a communicable disease, turns on her heel and, after stopping to shake Dave's hand, flees the premises. Crystal, Jeff and I watch, embarrassed and aghast, as Dave swoops in like a bird of prey pecking at people's worst fears.

The mood gets darker as the night wears on.

A 30-something man with a long brown ponytail grabs my arm. "You're going to have to pay me for the damage to my motorboat," he warns.

"Excuse me?"

Before he can answer, an elderly couple lambasts us as hippies. Next up, a man dressed like a lumberjack hisses that we'll have to pry his cold, dead hands from his steering wheel before we'd see him on a bike. And if he sees any of us riding on his Willamette Boulevard, he's going to run us down with his two-ton pick-up truck and no one will care, because everyone in North Portland, including the cops, hates cyclists and all that we stand for.

I argue back, "Sir, we stand for clean air, fitness, health, safety and mobility. Surely we can find common ground."

He leaves the meeting even angrier than when he came. "Well done," I mumble to myself.

I can see why Krys had gotten worn out and tired of this negativity. No wonder he expressed relief when transferred to make room for me. People are so incensed, you would think we're kicking them out of their houses or confiscating their cars.

After the meeting, I ride home slowly, tired, defeated. Back in the office, the fallout is clear. The project is put on hold.



The string of reality checks doesn't end in North Portland.

"When is this silliness going to stop?" demand business and community leaders. "Bike racks? You want us to put in bike racks? What's next? Are you going to require us to put in ski racks or toy chests too?"

Next stop: the Police Bureau. After a series of unnecessarily aggressive police actions that result in dozens of pricey tickets to cyclists, I arrange what I envision as a cordial discussion about enforcement of cyclist-related laws. This, I am sure, will end with a common understanding and newfound close partnership.

We'll walk in strangers, and walk out friends.

Once the donuts are consumed, I pass out a one-page summary. A nanosecond later, an officer cuts me off with, "Under whose authority do you speak? Are you a lawyer?"

I hold my smile. "Well, no. I'm the bicycle coordinator. I am very familiar with these laws, and..."

He raises his hand in protest. "We are sworn to uphold the law. Your personal interpretation means nothing to us." A few seconds later, I am staring at an empty room.

"Ah, yes," I think, "that went well." Chalk one up for utter naïveté.

In a few short months, I've discovered how far we have to go within my own agency, other city bureaus, the business community and the public at large. Nothing but challenges, day in and day out.

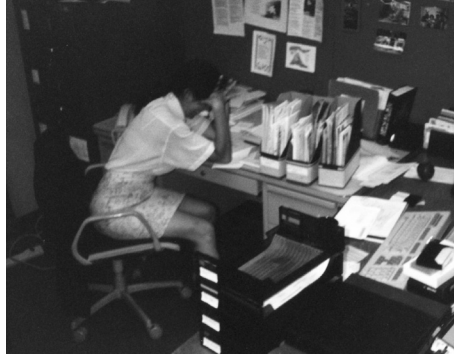
Back in my cubicle, surrounded by mounds of paper, the buzzing fluorescent overhead lights flicker against the orange cube walls.

My phone rings. "How's your dream job going?" asks my mom.

I cradle my aching head in my hands, moaning.

I've come such a long way.

I have such a long way to go.



*A low moment, caught on camera during the early days of my tenure at the City of Portland.*