

Jonathan Maus ([00:08](#)):

Welcome to episode five of the BikePortland Podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Maus. This episode is a conversation with Prescott Elementary School principal, Nichole Watson. I first met Nichole in June, 2020 during the height of the racial justice protests in Portland and just a few months into the COVID outbreak. I was on the Black Girls Do Bike ride, and Nichole was one of the co-organizers of that event. Now I want to pause here for a second and appreciate that Nichole is a black woman who works with communities in East Portland. Her mere presence in the cycling space counters many of the narratives that plague cycling in Portland. That it's a thing dominated by white hipsters from the central city or guys like me, to be honest. Many Portland bike advocates have grappled with that perception for years and are finally beginning to break away from it, both themselves and I think we are doing that as a broader community.

Jonathan Maus ([01:06](#)):

And rides like the Parkrose Pedal that Nichole and her partners are putting on this Wednesday, September 1st at Parkrose Middle School, we should all go, those type of events are an indicator that Portland's bike scene is becoming less centered around inner east side neighborhoods and that black and other people of color are finding more support and confidence to be active in bike spaces than they had been in the past. When I first met Nichole at that ride in June, 2020, we had a great chat and I loved what she said about why it is so important for black people and especially black women and especially curvy black women as she described herself, to go outside and to take up space on the street. I've talked to so many bike people over the years, and I sort of have this radar, I think, for whether or not someone gets it.

Jonathan Maus ([01:55](#)):

And Nichole definitely gets it. That's why I wasn't too surprised when several months after that ride back in June of 2020, Nichole popped up again as the organizer of Prescott Pedal, a ride that she put on and organized and led as principal of Prescott Elementary School. When Watson and I spoke again during that ride, she talked about cultivating a culture around bicycling at Prescott and the nearby Parkrose neighborhood and why she felt having the school community ride bikes together was such a vital part of her work. Wednesday's Parkrose Pedal is a great sign that biking together as a community is alive and well in that part of Portland. It has also become even more relevant given that just over a week ago, violence between white supremacists groups like the Proud Boys and Oathkeepers and anti-fascist activists who were there to counter it spilled onto the streets of Parkrose.

Jonathan Maus ([02:45](#)):

So I asked Nichole about that violence and about other issues and about why as a very busy person and professional and principal of a school right now with schools starting literally in one day, why she's made cycling a priority and made time for it. And we recorded this conversation from her desk at Prescott Elementary School. Hope you enjoy it.

Jonathan Maus ([03:11](#)):

So I'm so glad you took some time out of your crazy day. I know school's starting and bike ride coming up, I know how you are, you always get yourself probably involved with all kinds of stuff. So thanks for coming in. So last time we talked it was October at the Prescott Pedal. Now how's this ride that you're planning tomorrow related to the Prescott Pedal? Is it kind of the same thing with just a different name and maybe a bigger scope or what?

Nichole Watson ([03:37](#)):

So last year we hosted our inaugural Prescott Pedal and it was extremely successful. One of the things that we recognized, or I recognized as a new principal in a new district is the need, I think, to share. And what I recognized, what Prescott was building, we didn't want to keep it all to ourselves. We wanted to share, we wanted to make it a larger district effort. We had hoped... and I think the goal for me is always around students' liberation and student engagement. And it's about finding ways that our children and our babies can express themselves and express themselves as authentically as possible. And what we saw with the Prescott Pedal was just that. When we thought about getting back outside post COVID, we're in the midst of figuring out how to do life together with this virus, we kind of talked as a district about what would that look like to get back outside and do that together.

Nichole Watson ([04:38](#)):

The goal of the Parkrose Pedal is similar to the goal of the Prescott Pedal was, one, is to really center various modes of getting from point A to point B, but doing that in a way where we get to be able to show up and engage as our authentic selves. It's about kind of this meshing of traditional cycling that we've seen in our city with a more cultural identity around cycling that we see in many communities of color. The goal for us as a district is knowing that we're going to be bringing many of our kids and families back together in crisis and we want to do that in a way that allows us to have a little bit of fun, to get outside and get some exercise and to figure out how do we gather in these groups in socially distanced ways to prioritize our safety.

Jonathan Maus ([05:31](#)):

What is it about getting kids and families and staff, everybody on bicycles that makes it a priority for you?

Nichole Watson ([05:39](#)):

That's a great question. I think for me I can still consider myself an emerging cyclist. One of the things that I think I love about cycling is that it has evolved with me as I've grown up. I remember cycling as a kid, I was on the handlebars or on the spokes of my friends bike. I was able to kind of cycle from my house in Northeast Portland to the Lloyd Center at the time. That was a really big deal. It was the way in which we commuted and we were able to use transportation in this kind of alternate way. As an adult, I have kind of re-developed my relationship with cycling and it has evolved and it has grown. And one of the things that I think is important as a building leader is to recognize that all of our kids deserve to have access to transportation. They deserve to move from point A to point B.

Nichole Watson ([06:38](#)):

And when we think about the various ways that our kids are going to come back into community with one another, as different as they're going to come is also as different as the ways that they're going to get there. And I think for us as a district, me specifically as a principal, it's important to center fun and to center cycling in a way that says there can be a both and. There can be a both, a way we transport ourselves and cycle to get from point A to B because we're following the rules of the road and we are using our laser line and we're using our symbols. And then there is a way for us to commute and to be able to transport on our bikes in a way that is a bit disruptive, in a way that it is not in alignment with the particular culture that we're seeing around cycling. Why is that a priority? Because it's fun, because there is a way for us to do two things at once, to have fun and to be teaching a skill at the exact same time.

Jonathan Maus ([07:37](#)):

And I'm curious what you hear from your school community about cycling. What are some of the messages that kids talk about, families talk about? What kind of biking do they do? What do you hear about it?

Nichole Watson ([07:47](#)):

I'm hearing a little bit of everything. I am seeing a cluster of kiddos that want to work on bikes and learn how the structure of a bike and want to take it apart and put it back together. I am seeing some clusters of kiddos that kind of want to know what are the alternate ways of wheels. Is there wheelies? Can I use my skateboard? Can I be on a scooter? Which is kind of what we were seeing in the '90s when I was growing up where we would have chromed out chassis and different ways that we were just showing the creativity in our bike. And I want to bring that back.

Jonathan Maus ([08:20](#)):

You talked about that when we chatted back at the last ride I saw you at about how some of the typical ways bike advocacy orgs teach bike education can be pretty stale and boring, and that you'd somehow stumbled upon some YouTube stuff, which I actually personally really love too. Whether it's the... actually, wheelies are huge now. The wheelie kids. Scraper bikes were big years ago, but now that the wheelie kids are going all over the place. And I was hoping, thinking, maybe you'll be able to cultivate anything around that. Have you tried to kind of do that, maybe hint to the kids, maybe it's an art project or something? Or anybody... you see any kids out on the campus there at Prescott souping up their bikes or anything?

Nichole Watson ([09:00](#)):

They are. Well, Camp Prescott is primarily used as the community space to practice their skateboarding and cycling skills. So we've got this real long, big set of stairs. And for whatever reason, that looks like a space our devices should be. And I am, instead of discouraging that behavior, I am trying to analyze that behavior, to understand what is our babies communicating to us about what they need and what they want. I think similar to what we did last year was around just giving permission, giving space. So part of the ride Parkrose Pedal is about inclusion and about belonging. About all different forms of ways in which we ride our bikes are welcome in this space. I'm hoping to see some wheelies, I'm hoping to see some handlebars and some spokes, but I've got to also give space for that behavior so that we can see it demonstrated.

Jonathan Maus ([09:55](#)):

That sounds great. I hope to see that kind of stuff too coming out of Parkrose area. But I mean, on a more serious note, there's almost increased relevance for the work you're trying to do on getting bodies out on the street and taking up space, right? Which is something I love you talk about so much. Because as you know, about a week or so ago, there was a Proud Boy rally. And somehow there was some talk that maybe city hall even encouraged them to go out to that neighborhood to take some of the heat off of downtown.

Jonathan Maus ([10:23](#)):

And I know another principal in the area there of the high school had made some statements in the media about how she didn't really appreciate that. It's almost like city hall is throwing a little bit of shade

in the Parkrose area. Go have your fights out there you white supremacist groups. Some serious stuff. So how has the events of August 22nd and this sort of tension around these Proud Boys coming out to rally? How has that, or has that impacted the way you think about this event at all? Is that in the back of your mind?

Nichole Watson ([10:49](#)):

It is definitely something that we talked about as a planning team in figuring out what incidences could we run up against. I think this is the part of our political climate that we've just got to navigate. And I think it is challenging. I think we take it event by event, day by day. What we really wanted to focus on and center on is family. We want our families to know we miss you. It has been 16 months since we had done life together in a traditional sense. We are excited to get back outside, but we're also excited to say that we're here and that although there is this dysfunction happening societally, that we still, even though these dysfunctional moments happen, we still can practice the resilience of what it means to gather and to do that in community and in belonging and in safety. And isn't that what cycling... I mean, I think when I think about cycling as a kid, that is a part of what I loved about it. It's the way at which it brings me together with my crew and my squad-

Jonathan Maus ([11:52](#)):

And you're saying, it can be this almost defiant way of saying, look, we're out here. We're in the street. When we were kids, it was like, "Look, mom and dad were out here. The street lights have already come on, but we're still out biking."

Nichole Watson ([12:06](#)):

We're still here.

Jonathan Maus ([12:07](#)):

For the '90s or whatever in cities, it was kind of for critical mass, it was like saying, "Hey, we're here. We're going to run the lights and we're going to [inaudible 00:12:15] around and we're here." And so it now maybe there is something there about, I hear what you're saying about some of these groups coming over there. But it's like, "Look, we're resilient. We're going to just keep coming out and you're not going back in to keep us."

Nichole Watson ([12:26](#)):

And love wins. And ultimately we are greater together and we're going to demonstrate that with this event.

Jonathan Maus ([12:31](#)):

I love it. I love it. So, I mean, speaking of the event, what can people expect in Wednesday's ride? Can you give me a little bit of the flavor of what we might see?

Nichole Watson ([12:40](#)):

So Wednesday at one o'clock we are meeting at Parkrose Middle School. All wheels and ages are welcome. We have a walking component of the route that is being organized by Oregon Walks and then we have a cycling component of the ride that is being organized by PBOT, Safe Routes to School and Cycle Oregon. At one o'clock when the event opens, our community partners will be in this space. We

have OHSU that is going to be on site to provide COVID testing and vaccinations. We will have Cycle Oregon there.

Nichole Watson ([13:10](#)):

GoGo Ride is a new transportation initiative working with some folks around safe ride share practices for women, fems and non binary folks. We will have a community cycling center on board. Trauma nurses are going to be there from the Legacy Emanuel space to be offering helmets. And so we're just hoping to want to gather in a safe way and hoping that folks will come out and either walk or rollerskate. We've got [inaudible 00:13:36] rollers coming out to join us, to provide rollerskates. And we're just wanting to get outside and to do that in a way that centers belonging and community and family. And that is what we're hoping to center and to celebrate on Wednesday.

Jonathan Maus ([13:50](#)):

That's fantastic. It's such important work, especially now with COVID and so many people I think are maybe staying inside more than they should. And kind of getting out and out in the streets has never been more important. So I really appreciate and love the work you're doing, Nichole. So keep us posted and have a lot of fun tomorrow and in the whole year.

Nichole Watson ([14:08](#)):

Awesome. Jonathan, thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Jonathan Maus ([14:15](#)):

That was Prescott Elementary School Principal, Nichole Watson. You can find her on Instagram @NYK\_Watson. And again, that ride that she's putting together happens Wednesday, September 1st at 1:00 PM and it meets at Parkrose Middle School. Thanks for listening. If you liked what you heard, please leave a review so others can find this podcast more easily. And, of course, make sure to subscribe so you don't miss the next one. Speaking of subscribers, thank you to everyone who supports BikePortland with a monthly subscription, because they are the ones who make this content possible. And until next time, you can find the BikePortland Podcast on apple, Google, Spotify, and wherever else you like to listen.