

Jonathan Maus:

Welcome to the BikePortland Podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Maus. In this episode, you'll get to know TriMet bus operator, Dan Christensen. Known as Bus Driver Dan to his many Twitter followers, Dan is more than just a bus driver, he's a storyteller, a community builder, and in my opinion, he's a big part of what makes Portland so special. And from his seat behind the windshield watching what he calls Portland on the big screen, he has seen an awful lot since he started driving for TriMet 16 years ago. I wanted to talk with Dan, not just because of what he's seen on his bus over the years, but for how he sees it.

In this interview, he shares stories from his bus and what they mean to him and why he thinks transit is so much more than just a way to get from point A to point B. We also talk about whether TriMet's bad reputation has gotten to him, how he drives around bike rider, why he still remembers the name of his first school bus driver, why he only counts some of the thank yous he gets from his riders, and much more. If you love transit, actually, if you love Portland, I think you'll really enjoy this episode. Here's our conversation. Dan Christensen, thank you so much for coming by and on short notice. It's great to have you here.

Dan Christensen:

My pleasure.

Jonathan Maus:

As I was looking to do a little bit of background before you came over, you started driving a bus right around when I started doing BikePortland. You also did a blog, you did podcast, I feel like we've had these similar things we did.

Dan Christensen:

Yeah, for sure. Yeah, 2006 is when I started driving the bus and in the next year I started my blog.

Jonathan Maus:

I was telling Taylor about you and I said, "Yeah, it's funny if you click on the Dan Christensen name on the BikePortland Archives, you see some fun stories over the years that we've had." But I want to talk about some of that stuff, not those things specifically, but just I really had you come over because just think you have an interesting perch on Portland sitting in that bus seat, especially given the changes you've seen over the years. Obviously, lots of changes in the city. But before we get to some of that stuff, as a question I like to ask I think almost everybody I've interviewed, which is, what's your personal relationship to mobility and how you've moved around through your life?

Dan Christensen:

Well, I can tell you that my mobility started with bikes. I can remember one of the biggest day of my early life was when I learned to ride a bike and my dad took me right down with my whole family, we went down, bought a bike. And that was a great thing to get around the neighborhood and then my mom was like, "Okay, we got to set up these parameters where you can go."

Jonathan Maus:

Oh, really?

Dan Christensen:

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus:

Where was that? Where did you grow up?

Dan Christensen:

I grew up on 46th and Ainsworth.

Jonathan Maus:

So a Portlander?

Dan Christensen:

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus:

Grew up as a Portland. 46th and Ainsworth.

Dan Christensen:

Yeah. It was not part of Portland at that time, it was outside of Portland.

Jonathan Maus:

Did you have some fun gravel streets to rip around on? What was it like?

Dan Christensen:

Oh, I lived on a fun gravel street. We had a main street, Ainsworth, and then 46th that ran down the side of our house was gravel, and then across the street between Simpson and Ainsworth, there was this unimproved, it wasn't even gravel, it was dirt. And so it was just wild and all the kids played there.

Jonathan Maus:

Oh, that sounds so great.

Dan Christensen:

Everyone called it the Western Hills and the whole neighborhood went there to play.

Jonathan Maus:

That sounds so nice having a place in... And that part of town is still like that in a way. I mean, Coley is known for their big lots and to me it looks like a bunch of urban farms. And it starts around east of 42nd, I feel like it's like that, but sounds like a good-

Dan Christensen:

Yes. Because it was outside of Portland, it was strange because it had this weird mix of commercial and residential and industrial, small industry. It was a weird mix, but I loved it because you were connected

with everything. It wasn't over there is where these people are and over there is where those people were, this is all ours right here. So it was a very different neighborhood.

Jonathan Maus:

Yeah. And did you end up taking the bus to high school or to school or what was your first experience taking the bus?

Dan Christensen:

Oh, I went to Kennedy Grade School and my first-

Jonathan Maus:

As in the Kennedy School where-

Dan Christensen:

The Kennedy School that's now a barn, theater and everything. In fact, if you go out the back towards the parking lot there on the wall is a class picture, I'm in the lower right-hand side with the big head.

Jonathan Maus:

I love it.

Dan Christensen:

I think my head was the same size in third grade.

Jonathan Maus:

Okay, to help folks understand, what year, what era was this?

Dan Christensen:

'72, '73.

Jonathan Maus:

So you're going to Kennedy School?

Dan Christensen:

Yep. And so I had to take a bus there and I even know my bus driver was named Mrs. Yost. Everyone in the neighborhood knows that bus driver. She was fantastic. And if you were really good all week, she would turn off of Killingsworth, two blocks early to go down the gravel roads and throw us all over the bus. We would bounce around and it was great. And so everybody's like, "Be good, Friday's coming."

Jonathan Maus:

All you wanted was just to get bounced around in the bus? Life was so simple.

Dan Christensen:

That was the best thing.

Jonathan Maus:

That was so exciting for you.

Dan Christensen:

My kids are like, "What's on the internet?" And I was like, "Go down the rocky roads." Yeah.

Jonathan Maus:

That's so funny. So I mean hearing that it's not too surprising that you had a good impression of what it would be like to be a bus driver. Is that enough to say about that or was there something about... How did you end up working at TriMet or was that your first bus driving job?

Dan Christensen:

Yeah, that was my first bus driving job. I worked at a big bank that was prominent in the problems of 2006 to 2008.

Jonathan Maus:

Enough said.

Dan Christensen:

Yeah. And so that was driving me nuts to be sitting there and to be told, "Hey, you have to be a good guy, you have to be above reproach, blah, blah, blah." And the guy telling me is the next week in front of Congress. So there were two drivers I met, one was my brother. My brother David said, "Hey, why don't you become a bus driver?" And I went, "Nah, I don't know, I'm doing really good at banking, blah, blah, blah." And then I noticed that every night I got off at Willow Creek to take the train home, there was a bus driver and she was juggling these glow in the dark balls and just relaxing on her break and laughing. Everybody was interacting with her, everybody was having fun and I went, "I want that job. I want a job where on my breaks or I walk out, it's done." And she just retired at 47 years, a bus driver.

Jonathan Maus:

Wow.

Dan Christensen:

Real amazing. I even gave her a big hug the other day. And yeah, just totally amazing, she just represents everything good about bus driving.

Jonathan Maus:

I love it. But in that perch up there on that seat, staring out that window for these 16 years of obviously tremendous changes, boy, I just wonder if you can reflect on that for a bit here. What are some of the things that pop into your head when you think about the arc of change from when you started driving to now? And I'll help focus you because I know there's got to be a lot there, but is there something that pops in the most?

Dan Christensen:

Well, first I would say I always laugh and I call it having the Portland channel on the big screen.

Jonathan Maus:

I love that.

Dan Christensen:

Because you're literally sitting there, you've only got one channel.

Jonathan Maus:

It's binge-watching Portland reality TV.

Dan Christensen:

For 16 years.

Jonathan Maus:

For 16 years.

Dan Christensen:

Wow, this channel hasn't changed much.

Jonathan Maus:

Mean, let me help that. I realize that was too broad of a question. So you got into being a bus driver, in part it sounds like, because you wanted change in your life, right?

Dan Christensen:

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus:

So how has being a bus driver changed you?

Dan Christensen:

Well, first of all, I learned more about the city than I ever thought I knew. Having grown up here, I've lived other places for brief times, a year, two years or whatever. But having been a bus driver here, you learn far more about Portland than you ever thought you'd know. Neighborhoods you never been to, people you didn't even know lived here, you have a lot of learning to do about just your own city and you never knew it. So that's been one of the fun things is all of a sudden I know all these little nooks and crannies of the city that I didn't have a clue existed before. Even after the couple of years when I first talked with you, I was still learning. And that hasn't stopped, I'm always learning. And that's a fun part of being a bus driver.

Jonathan Maus:

And you're open to it, it's something that you embraced?

Dan Christensen:

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus:

The learning part. I mean you could just close it out and just do your job kind of thing.

Dan Christensen:

Right. And I think that there are drivers who do that to survive.

Jonathan Maus:

Coping mechanism kind of stuff.

Dan Christensen:

Yeah. And my coping mechanism is engaging. That's how I feel better.

Jonathan Maus:

That's so interesting. To you, the job is to embrace it, not to shut it out?

Dan Christensen:

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus:

Do you mind if I read a little thing you wrote the other day on Twitter? One story.

Dan Christensen:

Oh gosh, go ahead.

Jonathan Maus:

I love the little stories you tell on Twitter. I think it goes just with what you were saying. You wrote this, "Meeting people where they are is not just a growing buzz phrase, it's an essential tool. A writer in tears admitted she missed the hospital stop because her father was in his last hours and she was afraid. A lady on the bus, I call Mrs. Flower, came over and embraced her, then asked, 'Is it okay if we say a prayer for you?' At the far end of my run, with time to spare, I secured the bus and joined the others crowding around. Mrs. Flowers said a wonderful prayer, she empowered others with what she learned firsthand about grief. After, Mrs. Flowers held her hand until we returned to the hospital and then gave her a hug before she got off the bus. She thanked everyone. Understanding what people need and doing your best to meet them there, that makes you a better driver."

Dan Christensen:

Yeah. And see the hero there is Ms. Flowers. A lot of people said that was not about me, it was what I observed. And I used to say, "I'm a good storyteller." I think I'm an okay storyteller, but I'm really an observer. So this is something I observed. And the person who stepped out of her comfort zone to come over and say, "Hey, do you need help? Can I say a prayer for you?" Of course I'm trimming it down a little bit to fit on Twitter. That person was reaching out to her. I supported that, but it was her, she was the hero of that story. To do that for another person you didn't even know, that was my hero.

Jonathan Maus:

How do you feel like your role as a bus driver impacted that story, that situation?

Dan Christensen:

I think people were surprised. I think a lot of bus drivers try to keep that emotional distance and I don't fault them, that is a defensive mechanism. But I learned from people like this Ms. Flowers, that you got to have the courage to step out, you got to say, "Even if it's a mistake, even if it's wrong." There's been times when I saw someone on the side of the street and I've stopped the bus and checked on them and they screamed at me, one threw a half-eaten can of beans at me, but I'm like, "Ah, I'm still going to do it."

If I see somebody in need, I'm still going to do something. I don't know what, but I'll see. I'm making some effort. But she made the effort and my job I felt was supporting her. Yeah, when I got up about half the bus got up and joined her and when I got out of my seat, the other half joined in and the one guy says, "I'm an atheist." And he was crying as much as the rest of us were. Because it wasn't about us, it was about me as a driver, it was about those two and their moment and what it meant to that lady was phenomenal.

Jonathan Maus:

You also believe that there's something about the bus itself and the act of taking transit that maybe connects people or is maybe important or special in and of itself. Am I reaching there? I mean, you wrote something on Twitter, you said this quote that really stood out to me when you said, "Transit is all of us." So can you connect the dots between that story and this idea that somehow transit itself, the space of the bus is somehow important in that?

Dan Christensen:

Yeah, it's something that's been brewing in my mind and a lot of people will say, "Well, transit is only 10% of the population," or whatever number they throw out. And I'm like, "But that doesn't tell the story. Because it's 10% now, but of young people it's 90%." I don't know anybody who grew up in Portland that didn't take the bus at one time regularly. And a lot of it is the rest of a lot of older people who can't drive anymore or who have epilepsy or who have some sort of disability, to them it's 90% is the bus and then the rest of us is maybe in the snow and stuff. So you're passing through the bus at different times, at different speeds in your life. And it's different for everyone, but it touches everyone. It somehow touches everyone, even if you've just never rode a bus, there's somebody riding a bus to your job.

So it is this micro community in the bigger community and it has its own rules, it has its own way. Things people do on the bus, they don't do just standing on the street or walking by each other. So there's all sorts of things, this is just one element of it. I don't have a good answer for you, it's just this feeling that I've been dealing with, that I've noticed. This is the story of transit, it's this micro community that is emergent order, people have developed this, how we behave on the bus, what we do on the bus, on their own. There's no one saying, "Hey..." There are a few things like, "Give up your seat," or whatever. But there's a lot of it happens when you don't even know, even as a driver, all of a sudden you see five guys get up or help somebody unload something from the bus and you don't know, but that happens. So I'm working on that. It's a process.

Jonathan Maus:

I wonder though if it weighs on you or how you think about the fact that just what you were saying, how people order themselves on the bus, how people act on the bus, what that space is like, if it weighs on you that that has changed a lot, that a lot of people listening to this are thinking, the pictures that are coming to their mind might not be a great story like the one that you shared, a coming together. It might be less positive, let's say, with maybe people that they don't feel comfortable around or stories they've seen in the newspaper about some bad interaction on the bus. I mean, you certainly know that the reputation of that space, of transit itself has not had a super, great go especially of these last few years. I just wonder, does that matter to you or how does that weigh in your mind?

Dan Christensen:

That doesn't matter to me at all. I try the best I can. And I've been assaulted, I've had problems, but there's so much to unpack there because it's a simple, an easy question to ask, but there's a lot of layers to it. Because first of all, humans are negatively biased. We're built with that in us.

Jonathan Maus:

Meaning that we want to focus on negative things more?

Dan Christensen:

Absolutely. Plane lands safely, news at 11, never hear that. Right?

Jonathan Maus:

Right.

Dan Christensen:

That's an old joke. The person that said, "There's no lions between here and the waterhole." They got ate.

Jonathan Maus:

Yeah.

Dan Christensen:

So the negative lessons were ways other people could learn and so we tend to focus on that quickly. And I think you've seen that in the biking. People tend to focus on negative things about the cycling world, "That bike cut me off or he ran that light," or whatever. And that becomes the issue, the story. But I think social media helps accelerate that. So no one asks the real question, which is, how violent is our society? And the bus has a slice of society on it. So if there's violence in society, they'll be violence in transit. So is transit dangerous? Well, the old economic professor's question, compared to what?

Is it compared to just walking down the street? Or if you're around 300 people on the bus, are you safer than around 300 people just random people standing around a 7-Eleven at night? You might have 300 people, you might have a bad encounter. So it's hard to extract what's really going on. It's easy to grab a headline and it's really easy if you're one of the people on the internet going, "Oh, this is always happening all the time." But I talk to drivers who are assaulted and no one likes that, no one wants that, everyone wants to stop that. But it's not the defining quality of transit and people on transit.

Jonathan Maus:



As you're saying that, I'm thinking about that idea that transit is all of us and it reminds me of the way I've been thinking about Portland in general as I hear these. Everything you just said I agree with in terms of the things that people really just grab into and want to talk about. And I'm always thinking Portland is all of us, so if you're going to really push this narrative that Portland's terrible and you shouldn't leave your house, do you also realize that we all live here too and we have to live in that? So wouldn't you want to try to maybe not focus on the terrible things all the time? Not to discount them or act like they don't happen, but I just wonder if you feel that same way too? And maybe is that why you like to share? I feel like you're a relatively optimistic guy and I find that you're sharing these really beautiful stories online, is that part of it, to try to at least infuse the narrative with something more beautiful or more positive than what people are usually getting?

Dan Christensen:

Let me think about that for a second. I think that's a good question and I would say this, I have a name for the people on Twitter, I call them hosepipes.

Jonathan Maus:

Hosepipes.

Dan Christensen:

The negative, they just blow out of a hose. Anytime something negative happens, they're ready to jump on board. And a lot of times you can see the same people saying the same thing and you're like, "What?" But there's two parts. I observe this negative thing happening and this is what I am saying is a cure. Now they may not be saying as a cure, they may be saying or they're professing it in a way of, this is all one thing, but you've got to see these in half, observation and solution. No city has ever been made better by people withdrawing. So it gets to a point where you're just reiterating this avalanche of negative and that's never going to fix a city. People aren't going to fix a city by panic.

Jonathan Maus:

Do you think some of your driver colleagues have withdrawn or stopped driving because of some of this negativity? You've stuck around, everybody knows that TriMet has had a driver shortage. Have you had friends that have left because they were done dealing with that and didn't want to stick around?

Dan Christensen:

I don't know many people that have left just because of that. It's usually a lot. Now, there could be. I find that people who've been disconnected from driving for maybe a decade are far more negative about what's going on than the drivers I know who are actually doing it.

Jonathan Maus:

Interesting. Which to me would give validity to the idea that I always think of, if the people that are actually out there, it's just like you said, it really frustrated me during a lot of this negativity because I was out biking around downtown or something and of course it wasn't what it was and of course it had changed, but it was never as bad as you would think if you just read the headlines.

Dan Christensen:

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus:

Downtown wasn't on fire and a perpetual war zone, it was actually fine, people were still eating lunch on the sidewalk and everything. So yeah, I feel like you're-

Dan Christensen:

It has changed and there are some negative things, but it's not a throw in the towel, it's over. And I think there's a lot of people who hear this in the news and there's always muckrakers in the news who just jump on, they might have national platform, they hear, "Portland, it's burning from one end to the other." There's somewhere in the middle where we can rationally look at problems and start to solve them and admit these are issues we need to look at, even if it makes some people uncomfortable and we need to look at them, even though some people are saying, "Throw in the towel, the city's on fire." I try to tell the story of transit, the story of bus drivers, the story of train drivers and that story isn't just the negative things that's going on, it's the living things that are going on. Like that story, I was moved to tell that story, I thought about it a while and I have a policy about how long I wait before I write something, so I know where I'm at with this story.

I write those stories because they reflect a slice of life. A lot of drivers will drive the same routes I do and not have experiences that I have because my secret weapon is really observation. And I had, last Christmas, a guy get on my bus and he has three or four coats and a big sweater and it's all dirty and he comes on and he's counting pennies out of a Ziploc bag and this little bitty dog sticks its nose out from under his coat and he reaches into his pocket and gives it a little nibble of something and the dog retreats back.

And that was really amazing. I mean, this guy didn't want love, but as much as he wanted to be lovely, he's caring for this animal. Here's a person who's at the bottom end and yet he is caring and loving for someone. And that really touched me. I think a lot of drivers might not have even seen that, might've been looking out the window. Looking out the window is a metaphor because they might be looking right at it and not see that. But that story that's in that person and what it means. And now that I've seen him a couple of times, I know that dog's under there, I see it moving all around. But yeah.

Jonathan Maus:

That also seems like another vote for the job of driving a TriMet bus is made better, not just more enjoyment, but maybe becoming a better driver if you're open to those kinds of things. Like we were saying before, letting those things in is a way to actually be a better bus driver, like you said.

Dan Christensen:

There's somebody, I can't remember who I read, it's a really good book on nonviolence and he talks a lot about seeing the human in others. Seeing the human first. And it really matters.

Jonathan Maus:

Okay. On that note, seeing humans first, being someone who is all about observations, if you wouldn't mind, I'd love to talk to you about bike riders you may or may not see on the road in front of you.

Dan Christensen:

Sure.

Jonathan Maus:

Are there things that bike riders do that make your job harder or easier? Start with harder.

Dan Christensen:

Well, let's start with 15 years ago when biking was just booming. It was more people coming to biking than ever. I think I saw a rift between what I call cyclists who were, I don't want to use the term professional cyclists, but they were professional commuters. Yeah, professional cyclists, they paid attention, they had lights, they had helmets, they took defensive action. They weren't worried as much about who has the right of way as, is it safe? And then there was a whole bunch of new people who were just starting on that path. So if there were problems, it wasn't like, "This is a problem of all cyclists." It was a problem of these people are starting on this path where they're going to be driving and how they're going to be writing 10 years from now may not look like this, but they're starting, they're commuting and they took more risks. And what it did is it put the danger onto someone else's plate.

When you aren't driving defensively, you're basically handing someone else the gun pointed at your head. And so that was frustrating to a lot of commercial drivers, taxis, delivery people, bus drivers, because our vehicles are no joke. I always joke that the problem is with buses is they named them wrong, they named them too nicely. Bus sounds nice. "It's just a bus." If they would've called it the crush you, kill you, people would treat it a little bit different. Now when someone's hit by a bus, they could say, "Oh, that bus driver hit him." But if they got hit by a crush you, kill you, they'd say, "Oh, what were they doing? Were they in the road in front of the crush you, kill you? Were they cutting it off?" It's no joke and people in general, not cyclists, people walking, people in cars, take more risks around buses because they anticipate that driver's going to account for that.

Jonathan Maus:

It's a lot of expectations on your shoulder.

Dan Christensen:

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus:

"They're really good drivers, they won't hit me."

Dan Christensen:

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus:

I actually see people say that a lot. But you actually noticed visually from being a bus driver that there were these veteran riders that were more capable of riding and then these new ones. That's really interesting. Has that changed in the 15 years?

Dan Christensen:

I think-

Jonathan Maus:

Did you see those folk graduate now?

Dan Christensen:

Yeah. There's a lot more graduated riders.

Jonathan Maus:

Riders, yeah.

Dan Christensen:

There's a lot more designated riding areas, which I love. I love it because I think it sets in people's minds a concept that lasts beyond a barrier. Some of the bicycle paths have a barrier on them, cyclists on one side, cars and the other. Even after that barrier's done, there's this residual idea, "Oh, I should ride like there's barriers here or I should drive like there's barriers here." So I think that people in groups still act like jerks, that goes for everyone. Everyone will say, "I believe in traffic laws." But stand outside of a Blazer game after it lets out and see how many people are crossing the street on a don't walk, they don't really give a... Because mass groups tend to misbehave.

Jonathan Maus:

Well, on that note, what about Petalpalooza? What happens in the summer? Have you ever come up on, when there's 500 bike riders rolling by? Is that a-

Dan Christensen:

Yeah, I have.

Jonathan Maus:

... different animal.

Dan Christensen:

Yeah, they're different, they behave differently and sometimes wrongly to the average commuter going to work. And luckily it doesn't last long, you don't get Petalpalooza all day, every day.

Jonathan Maus:

True.

Dan Christensen:

So I don't mind waiting. But when I think about cyclists, I don't think about the exception, like a big group or something like that. I think about just the average, I encounter this person.

Jonathan Maus:

Okay. And I want to underline for any elected officials, policymaker types, Dan Christensen is saying he's been a TriMet bus operator for 16 years, he's saying he really likes physically protected bike lanes, dedicated space for bike riders. Lowers his stress, right Dan? You're nodding.

Dan Christensen:

Yeah, absolutely.

Jonathan Maus:

Good. Okay. So build more of them, right?

Dan Christensen:

Right. Well, what I would say is build more of them where there's a high density of cyclists.

Jonathan Maus:

Yeah. What do you do think-

Dan Christensen:

Do we need that on 122nd out in my neighborhood? No.

Jonathan Maus:

Okay.

Dan Christensen:

Do we need that down by PSU or between 33rd and Downtown? Yeah.

Jonathan Maus:

Okay. What do you think about the floating islands now? Is there any places on your route where you're serving stops without having to go all the way to the curb? Do you like those? I'm just curious. It's a really specific-

Dan Christensen:

Oh, yeah. Like on Division?

Jonathan Maus:

Yeah. There's one on Hawthorne, there's some on Northwest 18th and 19th. Have you seen those floating-

Dan Christensen:

Yeah, I've seen them. They're okay. Here's what I would say about that is no one's set down a criteria to say, "We're going to do this. This is what a success of this will look like and this is what a failure will look like." No one did that. So it's just more. And there's some people who feel, and maybe rightly so, we just need to do more. But if that more's not effective, if we don't have a measurable metric that, is this helping? Then we could be spending a lot of money on those and not enough on barriers to protect bike routes.

Jonathan Maus:

Right. So there's protection and safety when we're talking about these infrastructure things between buses and bikes or to streets in general, but then there's also, and I think this pertains to busing specifically, there's also efficiency. You hear so much about timing and the speed of trips. I'm sure you've heard of that. I mean, TriMet really trying to focus on making service better and a lot of that has to do with frequency and timing are. I'm curious what your opinions are of their Rose Lane effort. I don't

know if any of your routes go on those, the red painted lanes that the buses... Or any of the prioritization work they're doing. Do you have any input on that?

Dan Christensen:

First, I got out of downtown driving about the time those started. I loved them, especially at choke points. Would I want that everywhere? No. Do I want that at these critical choke points? Trying to get out of downtown and trying to-

Jonathan Maus:

Like Alder maybe?

Dan Christensen:

Alder, yeah.

Jonathan Maus:

Trying to turn off the mall and trying to get through those areas, then those work really well. High density traffic, high density pedestrians, high density cyclists. The one up by the justice center, I actually saw an accident that took a cyclist's life there.

Oh, you saw that?

Dan Christensen:

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus:

The one on Main and 3rd?

Dan Christensen:

Yeah, she was coming down and a truck turned.

Jonathan Maus:

Yeah, Kathryn Rickson. Yeah, that was terrible.

Dan Christensen:

So the idea of having designated spots or protected spots. But I'll tell you, I've seen a lot of changes in how cyclists ride and I've seen a lot of changes in how automobiles and trucks drive. But I really like the protections.

Jonathan Maus:

Okay. Well, that cues up a question that I'm a little bit hesitant to ask, but it might be fun and a reader told me to ask it of you. Because I really don't like to split people up in what kind of users of the road they are, because I know that's a fine line between getting divisive and blah blah, blah. But I think you and I are mature enough to figure this out. So between those two road users, drivers and then people on bikes, is there one that makes your job harder or easier? Which one is more frustrating to you to drive around?

Dan Christensen:

Well, I'm a little biased now because the route I'm on has precious few bikes. The few people that are regular commuters out there, I know, I have nicknames for them. I don't know them, they've never got on my bus.

Jonathan Maus:

The bike riders?

Dan Christensen:

Yeah. I've got Yellow Top and Speedo and all sorts of the... But I know, this guy knows lights, this guy knows timing, I can pull over here and stop, I know exactly when he is going to pass me on the left, he'll wave. He even has a light that he can move and he'll shine in my mirror, flash when he's coming by. And I'm like, "Oh, I like that." So I've got used to the handful of regular riders.

To me, to keep my head in the game, I pretend everybody's at the lower end and worse. That way, I'm driving defensively, I'm anticipating, I'm leaving space for everyone. I assume that this person's the first day they've been on the road, the first time they've been on a bike. I am pleasantly surprised when that's not the case. But I tend to not get into grouping because then you're lowering your guard. And you shouldn't do that, you should always say, "I'm here, I'm focused, these people, I'm going to assume they don't know." And when they do, I'm the first one to wave or at a light, stop and say thank you. I love it.

Jonathan Maus:

If there's something you could tell bike riders out there to do a better job at or just keep in mind or is there anything you want them to hear?

Dan Christensen:

I would say that, and I used to post this every Friday, I'd say, "The secret is that we all get home safe." Not laws, not rules, that you get home safe. That's above all what I want for everybody out there on the roads is get home safe. I think a lot of cyclists have that feeling like, "Oh, of course I do that. I'm the most at risk." But you've got to drive like that, you've got to ride like that, you've got to walk like that, you've got to be defensive at all times and just make sure that it's not a matter of speed, it's a matter of life. The only thing I focus on is life and safety on the bus. People say, "Do you interfere when people do this or that?" I'm saying, "Look, I'm focused on safety. That's what I'm focused on. I'm focused on safety outside of the bus." And that's what really matters.

Jonathan Maus:

Life on the bus.

Dan Christensen:

Life around the bus. It's life that's very precious. And we're getting into the summer times where people really get out and enjoy Portland. That's great, knock yourselves out.

Jonathan Maus:

And I personally think the more people that are going to be getting on the bus, we're going to have a nicer city. And I hope that a lot of folks that hear this will hop on your bus, Dan, because they're going to get the best experience.

Dan Christensen:

I always tell people, I don't know if they think I'm going to be like a Patch Adams on the bus, but I'm really quiet on the bus and focused on my mission. So I hope they ride my bus too.

Jonathan Maus:

Don't expect anything.

Dan Christensen:

But it's not a show. It's just me like every other driver in the system.

Jonathan Maus:

You mean the lights don't go down and the little spotlight doesn't come on?

Dan Christensen:

No.

Jonathan Maus:

"Welcome to Dan's bus, everybody. You might have seen me on the BikePortland Podcast"

Dan Christensen:

My riders laugh at me because I'm so pedestrian.

Jonathan Maus:

That's so funny. Okay, last question here. Do you care if people say thank you to you when they get off?

Dan Christensen:

Yes and no. When they say thank you, I always, "Yeah, thank you." "My pleasure." That's my tagline. But there is a test and this has a horrible name, it's called the Back door Test. We as social beings don't like to draw attention to ourselves. People will walk by me and go, "Thank you," upfront, that's fine, it's quiet, no one hears it. "Thank you." The person leaving from the back door that yells, "Thank you, driver," and breaks all the social barriers, says it loud enough for everyone to hear, that person's sending a different message. That's what I count. I count the back door, thank you.

I like all thank yous, of course, it's pleasant, it's beautiful, but that back door, thank you. When you get the same amount of men thanking you as women, the same amount of Asian people, Russian people, black people, white people, everybody saying thank you from the back door, you're doing something right. They're breaking that taboo and being outspoken in public, in front of people they don't know to thank the driver as they leave and I count those, I literally have counts of those. It's like I know I'm doing well when those counts are high, then I'm impacting people because they're breaking those barriers to say thank you. So, that's what I count.



This transcript was exported on Mar 28, 2023 - view latest version [here](#).

Jonathan Maus:

All right. You heard it folks, make sure to thank your bus driver. And thank you Dan for talking with me today. It was so fun.

Dan Christensen:

My pleasure.

Jonathan Maus:

That was TriMet Bus driver, Dan Christensen. This podcast is a production of Pedaltown Media Incorporated. Thanks to all the subscribers and advertisers who support our work. If you aren't one of them already, please become one today. And if you like this episode, please subscribe, leave us a review and tell a friend about it. Thanks for listening to The BikePortland Podcast, I'm your host, Jonathan Maus. Until next time, I'll see you in the streets.