

THE ACCIDENTAL BIKE ACTIVIST

You have to outlast the bastards.

—Norman Siegel, civil rights attorney

At the time of the 2004 Republican National Convention (RNC), I had attended approximately 35 Critical Mass group rides, the monthly bicycle celebration that occurs in hundreds of cities worldwide. Even then, I didn't think of myself as anything more than a cyclist out for a ride. Nor did I think of Critical Mass as an overt political statement, but as an antidote to the perpetual malady of riding a bike in New York City—the daily gauntlet of cab doors flung open into bike lanes, of pedestrians stepping obliviously from the curb, and trucks imperiling my soft body with tons of steel. Critical Mass was my two hours of safety and fun.

The arrest of nearly 400 cyclists the week of the RNC—264 of them during the August Critical Mass ride alone—changed everything. From then on, the harassment, detentions, and vilification of cyclists by the NYPD became constant fixtures on the last Friday night of every month, throwing many of us into positions that would change our personal and professional lives.

At that time, I began working with several other volunteers from Time's Up!, a nonprofit environmental organization, on responding publicly to the police department's intimidation and abuse. We were counseled by Norman Siegel, a prominent civil rights attorney and former director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, who recognized in the NYPD's tactics a familiar scent from the civil rights struggle he had joined in Mississippi in the early 1960s. Norman encouraged us to prepare for more arrests going forward, and to frame the police actions against cyclists in a larger constitutional context.

Armed with an old press list from Norman, and with only a vague sense of how to write a press release, we in the Time's Up! media committee threw ourselves into the gathering storm. The morning before the September 2004 Critical Mass ride, we gave interviews starting with the 5am Early Show news cycle, then the regular morning programs, the noon news, the 6pm and 11pm shows. The next afternoon, we held a press conference to denounce the 37 Critical Mass arrests and the confiscation of bicycles as a violation of due process and other fundamental rights.

Each month afterward followed a similar process. The police deployed squadrons of scooter cops, arrest wagons, and several helicopters on every ride; arrested or ticketed scores of cyclists; and impounded dozens of bicycles—including those locked on the streets. The press team labored to take control of the NYPD spin machine that was now pitching cyclists as anarchists and radicals—or,

in the immortal words of Commissioner Ray Kelly, as "extremists" who had "hijacked" the ride. We quickly became familiar with assignment editors at various networks, and rarely went a week without calling them.

We made certain gains: After a year, most major media outlets understood that Critical Mass was a bike ride that people participated in for a variety of reasons, not a shadowy cabal of social miscreants bent on dismantling the capitalist order. Every new story required diligent reiteration of our talking points: Group bicycle rides are a significant factor promoting safety. The only thing that had changed from prior to the RNC was the level of enforcement by the police. And with its density and level topography, New York is an ideal city for cycling that should be embracing rather than demonizing us.

By early 2007, hundreds of arrests and a handful of federal and state lawsuits later, a new team of volunteers has taken over at Time's Up! to manage the occasional press spin around Critical Mass. More importantly, they are encouraging the local media to diversify the type of bicycle story it covers, with more print dedicated to events like club outings and the visually poignant Ghost Bike memorials.

With the NYPD losing time and again in court, the department has taken to rewriting the law around bicycles in the name of "public safety," in the form of the new parade permit rule. It looks like there will be no shortage of lawsuits and the attendant stories in the near future.

I don't often ride in Critical Mass anymore, in no small part because it has ceased to be fun. But what began as an accidental necessity for me has led to a career as an advocate for improved conditions for cyclists and pedestrians. I believe strongly that, once the police lose a few more legal decisions, or a new Commissioner takes over, the rides will once again become a celebration of bicycling and a respite from the monthly battle for space on New York City's mean streets.

Matthew Roth is Director of New York City Streets Renaissance, an advocacy group campaigning for the reclamation of city streets as lively public places.