

HILARY ANDERSEN

Yellow Bike Project and Friends Meeting of Austin - Austin, Texas

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Interviewer: Anne Gessler

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Hilary Andersen: My name is Hilary Anderson. It is January 18, 2012. And I currently work for the State Coalition on Family Violence in Texas overseeing The Thunder Rehabilitation Programs.

Anne Gessler: And thank you so much for coming to talk with me today. I'm really excited. This is a part of the Cooperative Oral History Project. We'll be discussing the contributions that cooperatives and collectives and participatory democracy-type organizations do to advance social justice. So, the first question I kind of want to start with just to get things going is: Where are you from, and what general neighborhood do you live in now?

HA: I grew up in Northeast Indiana. I now live in Central East Austin, just east of [Interstate] 35.

AG: And what cooperatives are you engaged in right now?

HA: I've been a member of The Yellow Bike Collective for about two years now, and I'm also a full member of the Friends Meeting of Austin [FMA], which is a Quaker meeting here in Austin, Texas.

AG: Can you explain a little bit about why you decided to join both of those organizations?

HA: I grew up Quaker, and the Quaker process is sort of near and dear to my heart. I attended a Quaker college for my undergraduate education. I'm interested in collective process, consensus-seeking or unity-seeking processes in democratic organizations.

AG: And how does the Quaker organization that you found here compare to Yellow Bike?

HA: I mean, I think that Quaker process varies. Well, I'm going to answer a different question. I think that Quaker process varies from church to church. So there are non-credal churches and they are nonhierarchical. I'm particularly interested in engaging--or I have been interested in engaging with Friends Meeting of Austin because it's an unprogrammed service. So everyone's basically--if you feel called to speak, you do so in the course of the service. I think that Quakers at FMA, specifically, have a really good process for unity-seeking, and I use that term specifically rather than even "consensus" because I think that sometimes there's a confusion about what "consensus" means. And it's often who's got a steel butt--who can sit in the chair the longest until they get their way. So, a little bit more background on me is, I worked for a time at a place called The Center for Nonviolence, which is the oldest standing collectively run organization in the United States. It's in Fort Wayne, Indiana. There are paid positions there, and there's seven full-time staff. The process there is super-phenomenal.

So with that background, I was really interested in engaging in organizations that had a unity-seeking process, and Yellow Bike is one of the only collectives in Austin. Long time ago there was a place called Rhizome Collective that no longer exists. But there's different organizations

that were sort of under the umbrella Rhizome that are still around--namely like Inside Books Project and a couple others. So I've done some work with them as well. I guess there's sort of a thread throughout all of that. I feel very fortunate for those experiences that I've had. I stay in close contact with mentors from Center for Non-Violence and those folks who were doing that work up there are still around who started it way back in the day in 1972. So I think that given that sort of background and that history, I had a really good understanding of how collective-run process can go really really well, and I've seen it go really, really, really, really badly as well [laughs]. And so, I guess that's what brings me to these organizations.

AG: And what are the ultimate goals, then, of I guess Yellow Bike Project and the other consensus and unity-run organizations?

HA: Yeah, seeking unity--well, they vary. Yellow Bike Project, the mission is to get bikes to people, and have people--provide a space for folks to be able to work on their personal bikes and to also give away bikes in the community, including kids' bikes. Do you want me to talk about the Friends Meeting of Austin?

FMA is the Quaker organization. I think that it's important to note here that they have a really strong social justice advocacy arm of the organization, namely, the Death Penalty Abolition Committee, and the work we've done in prisons around Texas that I think is of note and of particular importance. I don't know--what else do you want me to say about that?

AG: Well, I was wondering if you could describe the community in which both organizations exist?

HA: Sure, like the geographical community? Friends Meeting of Austin is in, little farther East on 12th and Webberville. [Interviewer's note: Yellow Bike Project is on 12th St and Webberville St.] It's predominantly black and Hispanic neighborhood. We built our structure on Austin Energy's property, and we have a 100 year loan from City of Austin that I believe is for \$1. I'm not sure--I could confirm that. Then, Friends Meeting of Austin is just east of Airport Boulevard on MLK [Martin Luther King Blvd]. So, that neighborhood as well is predominantly black and Hispanic. It's situated pretty close to a Baptist church. And, you know, the interesting thing about that--well, I'm interested in critical race theory and dialogue, and I think that the geographical space that these organizations are located in is of note, because they are primarily run by white people. I think that that location--those locations are important to situate relationships with whiteness and privilege and the community that we're working in. There's a lot of folks that come in and use Yellow Bike--a lot of folks are white that end up using Yellow Bike. There are folks from the community that we're situated in, though, that do stop in and use our services. And I do think that it's important that we are where we are. As far as FMA goes, I think it's location is also important to the extent that there are folks from the community that end up stopping in a lot and see us as a resource for various social resources, if you will.

AG: And what kind of social services would those be?

HA: We've engaged pretty heavily with St. James Episcopal Church in providing outreach and resources to things like Red Cross, the local homeless shelter, and we have a pretty intentional outreach to a lot of social service agencies in East Austin. FMA has no paid staff, and so we decide wherever our funds go. And I think that's important to note in both organizations. We have financial oversight for both institutions. And I know all the finances and details [laughs] and how we choose to give our money and what we do with it.

The story with Yellow Bike was when we built the building we are in, it was opened two years ago in May, and we took out microloans from the community in order to fundraise the building of that warehouse. I think that our intent is to spread out the repayment with interest to those community members who gave us donations. But we've been so successful in the two years we've been there that I think we started out--gosh, you shouldn't quote me on this because my memory isn't going to serve me--but I think we started out with like \$250,000 in debt, and we've paid it off so aggressively that we're looking at I think only \$30,000 remaining, which is pretty impressive. I shouldn't talk about their finances. I don't know that it's a big deal, but the point is we've been able to aggressively pay off those loans.

And then with FMA, we bought that church from St. James Episcopal, which was, that transaction was in '06 and we paid off that building completely. So, there's really interesting conversations about funds that members have. A lot of people think that we should pay staff to clean the building because we have the money available. But we don't. We do it ourselves. We do all our house and grounds work ourselves, and the same goes for Yellow Bike.

AG: I want to go back a little bit and talk about the community--that's a very nebulous concept--around Yellow Bike. I was thinking about--You mentioned the Rhizome Collective--and it seems like they used to be very aware of the politics of gentrification and the politics of--like you said--being predominantly white in an of-color neighborhood. How do Yellow Bike members negotiate that division, I guess?

HA: Sure--well, I think it depends. It varies from collective member to collective member. Some people are really aware of that and the implications of gentrification, and some people aren't. And I think that comes at a cost, certainly to the community, and it is also beneficial in some way to the community. I would be mistaken if I didn't point out, that there's been a lot of advantages to having us in that community. But, I think that there's sort of two camps when it comes to the discussion about gentrification. It's either the march of the destruction of the community or its that you're adding some sort of value--and I don't mean monetary and fiduciary--I think some kind of inherent value to sort of communities that have struggled for a long time.

AG: Can you talk about those benefits that Yellow Bike brings to that community--like transportation access and other, observable change?

HA: Well, I think it's a safe space, too. And that's really important. We get a lot of kids that come in, and we ask that they be accompanied by an adult who is 16 years old or older, because otherwise we kind of become babysitters. So I think it's important for the kids. We're right there by Sims Elementary School, and we do a lot of work with them. So folks really see us around. There's an outreach program that we do called "Tools For Life," which is about building and fixing and maintaining bicycles with youth in AISD schools--specifically schools that we're situated nearby.

AG: And can you talk a little bit about the bicycle sharing program that Yellow Bike used to have--the "Yellow Bike" part of the Yellow Bike Project?

HA: Yeah--so it was built off of a concept that was--I should't speak to this--well, I can speak to this, but not with a great deal of authority. The idea was that in places like Denmark, there was "white bicycles" right, anywhere. So somebody could come and pick one up, and ride it to their destination, and then drop it off. And so, initially Yellow Bike had basically spray painted yellow bikes and release them into Austin for people to use at their disposal and leave for someone else to take. But what ended up happening was that people took the bikes, and then painted them a different color, and then pawned them. So, we still do bike giveaways, we do paint some of our bikes yellow. But, I think that it just was sort of impractical, partly because of geography--you know, we're not an island, so those bikes could go anywhere, and rather easily.

AG: It seems to me, though, that that's also kind of a complicated--I mean, it has pluses and minuses, too--the fact that people kept the bikes can also be positive because if the object is to get bikes into the community and have inexpensive access to transportation, that's also a positive thing too.

HA: Yeah. Absolutely. The reason we stopped it was because bikes were being taken and then sold in pawn shops--and not being used. And that's sort of unfortunate because the point is, it's ok if somebody takes it home to use it, but we don't want it sitting or being sold for monetary gain, basically.

AG: I guess that leads me to another question, which is, how do social justice organizations change the culture around their mission? If you're trying to advance bicycle awareness and appreciation of bicycles and yet bicycles are being taken and sold to pawn stores, it seems like there's a barrier there to change. So how do advocacy organizations kind of work with the culture to kind of change it?

HA: I think cultural shifts are monumental and massive, and that's a really large conversation. I don't know that it can always happen, because I think fundamentally we live in--this is getting me started on another conversation--but we live in a capitalist plutocracy and not a democracy. I think asking people to have that really hard conversation around capitalism, basically, is a something that is a consistent challenge. I don't think that--well, when I engage in a collective process, it's not that I'm engaging inherently in some sort of communist practice, it's that I'm

really asking us to look at democracy and decision making from a democratic pluralistic perspective. But I think that that larger conversation is really difficult.

AG: And how do you even explain to someone who has no idea of what a cooperative is, or what cooperative principles are? How do you explain how that can coexist or offer a critique of capitalism?

HA: I think that it's just that the basic principles are that we're working together to accomplish something. And that's the easiest way to explain something like a collective process, but that there's no bosses--and I think that a lot of people like that [laughs]--because maybe a lot of people don't like their bosses or something.

AG: And how does that inform your alliances with other organizations that aren't collectives or aren't cooperatives, or might even be government agencies when you're trying to organize for change.

HA: Well, we don't have any government funding, which is one thing. The only time we really ran into that was when we establishing 501(c)3 status, when we had to have a board of directors, which was basically the collective. I think that part of being who we are, there was a bit of flippancy to our actions, and we nominated one of our collective members' dogs to be the board president, which is probably not appropriate, but anyways he was very popular and had resounding approval.

But there's inherently--like you're working with an institutions and organizations and folks that don't operate in a collective run manner--and that usually goes pretty well. Because while it may take us longer to make a decision, when needed, we can move fast--Quakers can move very quickly as well, which is sort of--seems like an oxymoron to some folks who may be listening to this interview because it's generally thought that it's sort of a glacial speed that Quakers or collectives move at. I think there's inherently times when you have to make decisions quickly. Like, comes to mind, real estate, for example. You're moving at light speed to get things done--and it's possible to do that as well.

AG: I'm glad you said that because I often, when I'm researching collectives or cooperatives, that seems like a recurrent theme--the criticism is that decisions will never get made because so many people making that decision, but that seems inherently false. So can you describe a little bit what both your organizations--how they're structured, organizationally?

HA: The structures are that there's just collective members. So in Yellow Bike, it's a bit more formal, if you will. To obtain collective status, you have to have had volunteered for 24 hours over a three month period. And then, beyond that, you formally have to declare your interest in becoming an apprentice. And there's a list of things that you have to accomplish as an apprentice in order to be declared a full-fledge coordinator. And then as a coordinator, you can run shops with at least two other coordinators, and there are some other privileges that you get.

With the Quakers, you attend, and then if you're interested in membership, you go through a clearness committee. And the clearness committee is usually comprised of four or five people that you usually choose from the meeting to go through this process of obtaining clearness about the query that you are seeking an answer for. And that may be membership, that may be getting married, that may be changing jobs, or going for a new degree or something, but folks pull together clearness committees all the time for things. With the Quakers there's different subcommittees. There's Oversight, a committee called Worship in Ministry, Community Relations, Community Life is another committee, House and Grounds. I'm trying to think, did I say oversight? Finance, and Peace and Social Concerns, I think are all of them.

AG: And could you explain how often they meet? With the Quakers it seems like whenever you have a decision to make. But what about with Yellow Bike--how often do you all meet?

HA: Well, with the Quakers, each committee meets at least once a month. They have a regularly scheduled time and there's business meeting that occurs once a month where I guess bigger decisions are made. There's a clerk of each committee and there's a clerk of the meeting as well. With Yellow Bike there's one monthly meeting--so there's actually more meetings with the Quakers than there are with Yellow Bike. So yeah. Yellow Bike meets on the first Tuesday of every month at 7 o'clock.

AG: And can you explain the differences you see--or what your opinion of the differences are between an organization that--in which the members all meet and all have a stake in the organization's future and a cooperative like maybe Wheatsville, where you might be a member, but you don't necessarily have any decision-making power if you don't want.

HA: Well, it would be interesting if you--this is tangential, but there are some people interested in starting a worker-owned grocery cooperative in East Austin that is sort of based off of the model that you find in--I think there are two worker-owned grocery cooperatives in the nation--one out in San Francisco--Rainbow Grocery, and then one in Minneapolis. But that aside, I'm a member of Wheatsville, but I don't participate in any real substantial way. I think that's largely because it's consumer-owned. And that the decisions are being made by the board or the general manager, in that instance. So it's run a little more like a typical business, I suppose. As a collective organization, you know, if you don't like something, then you got to speak up. If you *do* like something, then you've got to speak up--you have to go through that process of that unity-seeking process that I described, or consensus, whatever you want to call it.

AG: And speaking of the different cooperative and collective-type organizations in Austin--for Yellow Bike, what kinds of other collectives does Yellow Bike associate with on a relatively regular basis?

HA: Well, I don't know; I'd have to think that one. I guess there's like the Orange Bike Collective here on UT's campus. I don't really know much about them other than that they exist. I don't have an answer for that because I don't know that we do.

AG: What about--I always see in newsletters and e-mails references to Treasure City Thrift and Bikes Across Borders and more Rhizome associated organizations?

HA: Sometimes they come to us with requests, and we usually do a pretty good job of publicizing what they're doing. You know, and I know--that's part of--I know folks from Treasure City, but that's on a personal level, or Inside Books. People come to us all the time with requests. Refugee Services of Texas--I'm working on a project with them right now. But I don't think there's any kind of formal relationship.

AG: Right, no. I should have rephrased that--not necessarily a formal relationship, but just a sharing of rescues and ideas and things like that. How important is it for Yellow Bike to network with other like-minded organizations?

HA: Maybe a better answer for you is that Yellow Bike is specifically interested in working to help develop other bike collectives around the country. So it's maybe not just a conversation here in Austin, but part of our overall mission is to be able to microloan in the future to help start bike collectives. And specifically I think we're engaging in conversation with some folks up in Columbus, Ohio to help them secure a space. And I think--that's come around through something called Bike! Bike!, which is a national gathering, which just occurred in San Marcos last year and will happen in Vancouver, BC this next June, where folks from--representatives from bike collectives all over the country and I guess North America come together to talk bike collective.

AG: And have you been to the one in San Marcos?

HA: Yeah, I went last year.

AG: Can you describe what that was like?

HA: Well you know, it's a bunch of dirty hippies coming out to talk about their bike collectives. I think I participated in a couple specifically around gender safe spaces and women-run shops and women-only shops.

AG: I know Plan B has the women and trans workshop day. How closely--let me rephrase that. So how involved are you in promoting those type of spaces around the country?

HA: I mean, around the country, I don't know--I talk about what we do at Yellow Bike, which is something called Lady Bike, which is women and trans-only bike shop that we do pretty regularly. And the intent behind that is to create a safe space. Because bike shops and even

Yellow Bike can be a pretty hyper-masculine place, so I first got involved in Yellow Bike because I was seeking I think a little bit more accessible space to learn in and Lady Bike was where I found it. That's why I became involved.

AG: And going back to your first couple days at Yellow Bike, how much did you know about biking? Were you just an enthusiast or did you know the rudiments of mechanics? What was your experience so far?

HA: I didn't know anything about biking mechanics. But I biked a lot. I was interested in becoming a little bit more self-sufficient. I had a really negative experience when I first went there. A dude took a tool out of my hands, and I being the sort of ardent feminist that I was, was pissed. And I left the shop. I was like, I'm never going back there again. But I ended up knowing some folks from there. And I talked to some pretty good--some pretty excellent street dudes and was like "Hey, look, this is my concern. This is why I'm angry." And they were like, "Well, go to Lady Bike, and also tell us about what you're concerned about." Which is how we developed a safer space policy there. Because I was mad [laughs].

AG: And can you talk a little bit more about Lady Bike?

HA: Sure, it's like a dedicated women and trans-only bike night that happens weekly. And, it's just that. It's ladies working on bikes with other ladies. Teaching them how to work on bikes, learn from them, and it's usually pretty small, but it's such a nice shop because it's small and it's quiet.

AG: And how does Yellow Bike publicize its programs?

HA: With our schedule on the website, or we'll make fliers and distribute them in the community if we really want to ramp up the awareness.

AG: And could you talk a little bit about your specific involvement in Yellow Bike? Are you a coordinator or what do you do?

HA: Yeah, I'm a coordinator. I think they kind of, like, see me as a social worker, too. So, I usually do work with local shelters and distributing bikes or organizing rides or workshops.

AG: And can you be a little bit more specific about the workshops and rides that you participate in?

HA: Sure, well next month we're doing a ride for Refugee Services of Texas that will raise awareness and funds for that organization. I also initially helped raise--well we just built bikes for the Domestic Violence Shelter in Round Rock. Specifically Round Rock has no public transportation. There's no buses. There's no way to get to a job or to day care or anything like that if you don't have a car. So it's a car-centric suburb. And the shelter had asked me if I knew

of any resources for transportation. I approached Yellow Bike and we built up I think 10 adult bikes and 10 kids bikes initially for them. So it just varies on the request from organization to organization. But some people might want us to teach them how to ride bikes, some people might want us to teach them how to fix their bikes, some people might want us to just give them bikes. But I generally like to teach folks how to be self-sufficient with their bike maintenance so that it doesn't just end up rusting on a slab somewhere. The bike that is [laughs].

AG: And what do you see the future for Yellow Bike? How effective do you think their outreach and advocacy programs will be in improving bike access to the city?

HA: Well, people will approach us all the time because our name is really well known in the city. Sometimes it becomes really old because its like, all we want to do is fix bikes, we don't want to work on art projects or whatever--you know, people will come to us for all sorts of things--music events, you name it, we've been approached. So I think we've been extremely successful. We've been extremely financially successful. I think we have a really solid ground to build on. And I think especially as the sort of green movement becomes more popular--and with that comes things like greenwashing--that's another conversation. People want--it's very fashionable to be on bikes right now--there's a bike culture. So I think that Yellow Bike will become increasingly more utilized. And I think for different pragmatic reasons; as the price of gas increases and the cost of owning a car is increasingly more prohibitive for a lot of folks, I think resources like Yellow Bike will become increasingly more utilized.

AG: Yeah, that's interesting. How would you press against attempts to kind of consumerize or commodify bike culture? Because it does seem like with this sustainable--almost like a fetishizing of sustainability, that it's--like you--said very fashionable to ride a bike and go to a co-op for groceries--how do you press for more longer lasting change when there this fashion factor, I guess?

HA: I think that it's a matter of education, too. I'm always excited--whatever gets people on bikes gets people on bikes. I'm like, even if it's just cool to do, Man get out there and ride your fixie, I'm great, that's great with me. I want you to be able to ride it safely, and responsibly, and to use lights, that would be great. But I'm not going to take qualms with it if somebody's just riding a swanky bike--that's awesome. But I do think there's got to be some sustainability there. I don't mean like, sort of the way we talk about sustainability in an environmental sense, but I mean like a longevity sustainability. I want that momentum that's built up around the sort of fetishizing of "co-op culture," if you will, and biking and cooperative grocery stores or whatever it is that people seek out, that they support those organizations, maybe even if they don't understand them completely.

AG: And how would you define sustainability, then? We're talking about environmental sustainability and also this longer-lasting lifestyle change--how would you define it?

HA: I think it's long-standing change. And maybe a global shift in one's world.

AG: And how do bikes fit in with that?

HA: Well, you know, even if you get on your bike just once a week to go to the corner store, I'd really like to see that. I think it's estimated that most car trips are--like 90% of car trips are less than a mile's radius away, or maybe it's 5 miles--I can't remember off the top of my head. It's small changes and small things. I still heat my house, and there's all kinds of ways in which as someone living in Western civilization I'm consuming resources at a much faster rate than anyone else. But I do think that bicycle advocacy is a really easy sort of fun way to make a difference.

AG: I think I reached the end of my formal questions, but would you like to speak to anything that you don't feel like we fully addressed?

HA: I mean, no. I do think that the intersectionality of all of it is important to note. To sort of think about why alternative transportation, and alternative economies, and alternative structures, and organizational structuring all matters. Because I think fundamentally what we've been doing for a long time in terms of a capitalist, top-down hierarchical structure really has its faults. Because there's really no checks and balances there. And as we've seen in the past couple years with financial meltdowns and folks being put out with being, like, closed on their homes and these really terribly tragic situations, I think it's important to remember that there's really alternatives--sort of global shifts we can make. When I say "global shifts," I think that sounds really monumental but it can be small in the way we approach social justice. Social activism can be found in ways to sort of undermine these radical ruptures that we can make in our world.

AG: Thank you very much, this was very enlightening.

HA: Thank you.