

An Oral History of Noah Silverman

4th Street | Prater Way History Project

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Reno native Noah Silverman is the Executive Director of the Reno Bike Project, which he co-founded with Kyle Kozar in 2006. The non-profit community bicycle shop and advocacy group is located at 541 East Fourth Street. Silverman drew inspiration from volunteering at a community bike shop called The Hub in Bellingham, Washington, where he earned a degree in Industrial Technology from Western Washington University in 2005.

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NOAH SILVERMAN

Interviewed on October 7, 2011
Alicia Barber, Interviewer

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Photo by Patrick Cummings

Barber: I'm talking to Noah Silverman. We're on the UNR campus. It's Friday, October 7, 2011. I want to start by asking you some biographical questions. When and where were you born?

Silverman: I was born in Reno at St. Mary's Hospital on July 11, 1980.

Barber: What part of town did you grow up in?

Silverman: I think it's called West Reno—west of Hunter Lake off of Plumb. I grew up on Thomas Jefferson Drive.

Barber: Where did you go to school?

Silverman: I went to Trinity Montessori, and then I went to Cambridge Elementary. They're both private schools. I went to Swope [Middle School] and then I went to a boarding school in California at a school called the Dunn School, in the Santa Ynez Valley, which is just north of Santa Barbara.

Barber: How many generations back has your family been in Reno?

Silverman: My siblings and I were the first to be born in Reno. My mom was from Washington originally and then lived in Los Angeles. She moved from L.A. to Squaw Valley, and was ski-bumming when she met my dad. He was from Kansas City and then moved to Vegas and then moved to Reno, where he went to UNR. He went to law school in Boulder, Colorado, and then moved back to Reno.

Barber: What are their names?

Silverman: Gary Silverman and Janet Chubb.

Barber: I'm wondering, as you were growing up in Reno, were you always interested in

bikes?

Silverman: Yes. We never had a TV, so we always had to find stuff to do outside. So I rode my bike. My parents actually gave me a ton of freedom. They were lawyers and they didn't really care what we did. They weren't home after school, so we had to amuse ourselves.

Barber: Did it seem like Reno was a good place to bike as a kid?

Silverman: Yes. Honestly, I can't say that I really thought about that. When you're a kid, you ride on the sidewalk. I rode my bike a lot, I can say that, for fun and for transportation. I wouldn't compare my opinion now to what it was then, because it's two different worlds.

I started riding my bike quite a bit in high school. That's where I really got into cycling and started racing. The school I went to had a kind of mountain bike team. A teacher who happened to be there convinced the school to let him do that, and there were, I think, seven kids all from the same grade.

Barber: You competed with other schools?

Silverman: No, we did only mountain bike races, and we would just go to whatever races were in the area. We'd go as far north as Monterey and then we'd go south a ways.

Barber: Did that happen year-'round?

Silverman: No, just springtime. It was kind of an anomaly, I think. It could probably never happen again. It was just the one teacher who proposed it and had seven kids to do it, and the school said "yeah," and the parents said "yeah," so they went for it.

Barber: Were the people who were in those races mostly older than you?

Silverman: No. You go to these races and there are age groups and skill levels as well. You have junior races, which are probably our age, teenagers, and then you have people of any age who race in the A or the B or the C, A being the highest. We all raced juniors, and none of us were really any good, but it was a great opportunity. The teacher was really cool. He let us get away with murder, and we got to leave campus every day.

Barber: Were these just day trips or would you spend the night?

Silverman: They'd be fun camping trips. It was totally unlike anything that boarding school is usually like. So it was a lot of fun.

Barber: So did he also teach a class?

Silverman: Yes, he was an English teacher—Jamie Wheel [phonetic]. I think he lives in Colorado now. We only did it sophomore and junior year, and he left after our junior

year. We were all in the same grade. He was obviously the person in charge and I don't know how we lobbied, but we got one of the new incoming teachers who knew nothing about mountain biking to take it over for that year, and it was not terribly organized. There wasn't a lot of focus or discipline, but we still got to do it, and we were seniors and it was great. It was fun.

Barber: How did you make the decision where to go to college?

Silverman: My best friend from Reno moved to Seattle when I was in high school, and after high school I wasn't stoked on Reno. I just wasn't having a good time here. So I moved to Seattle and worked as an arborist there for a couple of years, trimming trees, which I still do. I'm still an arborist.

After a couple of years in Seattle, I was ready to go to college. My goal was to take a couple years off. A bunch of my friends in Seattle went to Western Washington University, which is in Bellingham, so I went up there, attended community college at Whatcom for two years and then transferred into Western.

Barber: What did you think of Bellingham?

Silverman: It was great. It was cozy. It's a tough town to make a living in, actually. It's really small and there's not a ton of opportunity. With all those kids coming in and taking a lot of jobs, it's not an easy place to find a solid job.

Barber: What were the industries there?

Silverman: There used to be a Georgia Pacific paper mill there. I remember a big stinky paper mill that they've since torn down. So that was the industry. I'm sure there must have been some logging because I've been out on the winding roads, but that never played much into what I knew about Bellingham.

Barber: Did it feel like a real college town?

Silverman: Yes, it did. There are a lot of young people. I think the school has 10,000 people, and it's a small town. It's roughly 60,000 or 70,000, I think, including the outlying areas. The downtown was really concentrated, and there were a lot of bars. You'd see a lot of kids on campus, see a lot of kids downtown.

Barber: Did you bike around town?

Silverman: Totally, I did. I didn't really get into road biking—even now I'm not that into it—until Bellingham. I started to do a little of it.

Barber: Did you have a different bike for riding on the roads?

Silverman: Yes, I did. I think I did my first Century ride then, which is a hundred-miler. But mostly there is great mountain biking in Bellingham, so when I got connected with

The Hub, which is a community bike shop up there, and I met other people, then I started riding with them.

Barber: Tell me about The Hub.

Silverman: The Hub is a community bike shop, like the Reno Bike Project. It was kind of our model for what we tried to do, and it's a place where people donated bicycles and they essentially recycled them and reused them to the best of their ability. If a bike was complete and good, you could fix it up and sell it, or just sell it "as is" and someone else would fix it up. If it was only in bits and pieces, you'd take the parts off that were good, put those in the bin and then recycle the rest of the bike.

Barber: Did they have a pretty big crew of people who were mechanical experts on bikes who could rebuild them?

Silverman: No experts, no experts. We had a little crew while I was there who were just dedicated and really enjoyed it and that's why they were there. That place was partially volunteer, partially staff, and most just part-time.

Barber: Was it near campus?

Silverman: It was near campus. It wasn't on campus. It was downtown and the campus is six blocks up the hill, basically. You could be there in four minutes.

Barber: Do you remember how you found out about it?

Silverman: From what I remember, there's a bike path that runs through Bellingham, and it's right on the bike path. I just stopped in there one day because they had huge piles of bikes.

Barber: Did you work there as a paid job or as a volunteer?

Silverman: I volunteered there off and on for two or three years.

Barber: Do you know how long they've been around?

Silverman: They've been around, I think, over ten years now, and it started as a Yellow Bike Program, where they got some money from the city and they got a bunch of bikes fixed up and painted them yellow, and then left them around town for people to ride.

Barber: Just for free?

Silverman: Right. But those bikes always get stolen and trashed, and those programs never work out. As I understand it, two people started that, and then this guy Kyle came in and basically said, "You guys suck," and got them out of there somehow and took it over. He's been running it ever since.

Barber: When they would get the donated bikes and then fix them up, was the idea to sell them for a pretty low price?

Silverman: Yes. A new retail bike can start at around \$400, maybe a little less, and most of these bikes were in the \$200 to \$300 range. The lowest-quality new bike is pretty low quality. Initially, it'll work pretty well, but the parts are kind of cheap, so the longevity isn't good. These older bikes are built to last. Some stuff breaks, but with new parts and a ton of old parts, you can get stuff going for really cheap. It's how we modeled the Bike Project. It's just an affordable resource for people who want to ride a bike. So that's what they did and that's what we did.

Barber: When you were at The Hub, who was taking advantage of that service and buying these bikes? Mostly students?

Silverman: A lot of students. I think a lot of cyclists—mainstream is not the right word—but a lot of cyclists are turned off by the community bike shop vibe for some reason. I don't know why. They go and buy all their stuff new, and I don't think they really get it, because they're more recreation-minded. That could be totally untrue; that's just my opinion. You get a lot of commuters, people who ride their bike every day who do it for a conscious reason as opposed to just for fitness. Those people, I think, tend to gravitate more towards community bike shops. It's political, to a large extent, whether it's overtly or not.

Barber: I can see that, yes, if their cycling is part of a broader philosophy about how to live life or be responsible to the environment.

Silverman: Exactly, and to not drive your car every day. A lot of those people tend to migrate towards community bike shops. But so do students and other people since you can do some repairs in a community bike shop for a tenth of the price it would take you to go to a normal bike shop and pay for a new part and labor.

Barber: So you'd actually do repairs at the bike shop, too, at a cheaper rate?

Silverman: Yes. We were always doing repairs and providing people with public workstations that they could use, that they could rent themselves. Each workstation has a full set of tools where someone who wants to learn or knows how to fix their own bike but doesn't have all the tools can come in, pay three dollars an hour, and have access to all these tools and all these parts. So they can fix their own bike instead of paying a shop to do it, and instead of having to buy all these tools. The Hub did that and we do that, too.

Barber: Did you become aware of other places besides The Hub that were doing this when you were involved there? Probably since then you have, too.

Silverman: Since then, quite a bit.

Barber: Were you aware that it was a unique kind of service?

Silverman: Well, I knew it was unlike anything I'd ever been to before, without a doubt, and I was totally into it. I mean, I still am, but I was totally drawn in. I had never done any kind of volunteering before, and was totally stoked on volunteering then. It just combined a lot of passions, cycling and helping people get on bikes, and having them stoked to do it. It was a totally new experience, something that the Bike Project is trying to bring to UNR because they don't have it.

Barber: We'll get to that in a bit. At the same time, you were in college. What were you majoring in?

Silverman: I was actually working on a vehicle design degree.

Barber: So it's kind of related.

Silverman: Yes, totally.

Barber: Does vehicle design also include bikes, or was it mostly focused on cars?

Silverman: That program was focused on cars. It wasn't an engineering degree. Technically it's called Industrial Technology. I think it's a bachelor of arts degree. But it was a similar passion. I always liked bikes and I like cars, too. I had a real interest in them, and it suited my learning style, which is very visual, very hands-on.

There's a program called CATIA that we used extensively, which is hyper-sophisticated stuff. It's what Boeing uses to design all their airplanes, and it's incredibly powerful software and incredibly expensive. So I learned on the top stuff, which is great. It was fun. It's like drawing on a computer but doing it really well, and being able to do anything your mind can come up with.

Barber: It seems like such a specialized program. Did you know it was there when you applied? Is that what you were interested in?

Silverman: Yes. My friend was into it and I didn't have any direction I wanted to go in—part of the reason I didn't go to college right after high school. So when I heard about that program and saw it, I was pretty excited. Like anything, it doesn't always turn out. It's not exactly what you expect it is. The hands-on machining part is hyper-technical, which didn't suit me that well. Some of that stuff is super boring. Machining is actually pretty boring. It's a means to end because you can make some cool things, but it wasn't what I wanted to do.

Barber: So you didn't think of continuing on in a career in that?

Silverman: No, because you're either sitting at a computer all day drawing parts, which was fun, but not something I wanted to do all day every day, or machining, which is definitely not something I wanted to do all day. But it was a fun, interesting program. I

took a lot of math, which was fun, too. I really enjoyed it. I was doing that and working at The Hub. It was a good time. I got a lot out of college, I think, not as much from school directly as just the experience.

Barber: When did you graduate?

Silverman: 2005. I traveled for a year and then moved back to Reno.

Barber: What made you decide to come back to Reno?

Silverman: I wanted to move back home.

Barber: Did you have the seed of an idea about a bike project? How did that come about?

Silverman: Yes. It was something that I was really interesting in doing. I guess I had talked about doing it or at least thought about doing it in Reno, and met Kyle [Kozar]. I had met Kyle a couple times, but we weren't friends. This kid from Reno named Yale Johnson moved up to Bellingham and lived with me. We had a lot of mutual friends, and Kyle was one of his good friends. We started hanging out in Reno, and we talked about it a couple times and then one day we just decided to do it, and that was that.

Barber: What did it take to get started? Did you decide you wanted to have a shop right away?

Silverman: Our goal was to create a community bike shop, a resource for the community to come and fix their bikes affordably, to get their bikes fixed affordably, or to buy an affordable bike, just like The Hub. So the vision was pretty clear: we need a shop, we need bikes, we need employees.

We just had our five-year anniversary last Saturday. On October 1, 2006, we sent out an email stating that we were going to start a community bike shop and that we were looking for volunteers and donations, and then we started talking to people and organizing shop nights once a week in our friend's basement.

We were there for a couple of months—I don't remember how many—and then we moved to my garage for probably six or eight months. We moved into 250 Bell Street on September first of 2008. We were in that building with Cathexes. They rented us a big section of the garage.

Barber: So as you moved from place to place, how many people were coming in? Was it just staffed by you and Kyle?

Silverman: No. One of the original volunteers was a kid named Anthony Arevalo, who still works at the Bike Project. We'd have maybe eight or ten people in the basement on a given night. That would fluctuate with the temperature and whatnot, and then we moved to the garage and it would be more than that.

This whole time we were having meetings and organizing and trying to figure out what we needed, getting our nonprofit status and developing a board of directors and job

positions and getting employees. By the time we moved into the Bell Street shop, we had hired one person. Kyle and I didn't get paid. We hired a mechanic to run the place. It just kind of snowballed from there. By the time we moved out of there, I think Kyle and Anthony and I were the three employees, Kyle and I being salaried, and Anthony on an hourly pay.

Barber: How hard was it to get nonprofit status?

Silverman: A UNR college student—she might have been a grad student at the time—named Gwynne Middleton took us on as her project to help us do that. She did a lot of the paperwork. It costs almost \$1,000 just to apply. Between raising the money to do that and then having her do all the paperwork, it is a lot of work, but it wasn't that hard. They sent the application back to us a couple of times. They wanted it to be clarified further. But we got it—it might have been 2008 or 2009, and they make it retroactive to the day that you filed for a corporation.

Barber: What was the advantage of that, in your eyes? Was the goal always to become a nonprofit?

Silverman: Always, yes. We modeled the Bike Project after The Hub, which is a nonprofit, because even though we sell bikes and generate revenue, our goal is always just to help people get on bikes, to provide them with an affordable way to fix a bike or get it repaired or to find a bike. Being a nonprofit, there's a lot of tax you don't have to pay, obviously, and you can garner donations. So that was always the plan.

Barber: How did you go about asking people to be on your board of directors?

Silverman: A lot of the time we just asked people who we knew and thought might be a good person, mostly just cyclists—and some people approached us saying, "I'm interested in your organization." But that meant going to those people and telling them about our vision and our mission, and saying, "Do you want to be a part of this and help us?"

A big part of the role of any nonprofit board is oversight, ethical and financial, to make sure that the organization is doing what it says it's doing and is helping people. A lot of people are probably really confused about why we make money, and how that actually helps the community, but we have nine board members right now who make sure that everything we're doing is on the up-and-up.

Barber: How often do they meet?

Silverman: Quarterly right now.

Barber: Why did you think that Reno needed this kind of organization? Was there some specific reason?

Silverman: Yes and no. I had seen what a difference it had made in Bellingham in that so

many people utilized it, and Bellingham, I think, is a much more cycling-oriented community. Washington—western Washington at least—is just a different place than Reno. But at the time, the cycling movement was really strong in Reno. A lot of people were riding bikes and the whole fixed-gear fashion was really in vogue then.

Barber: What is that?

Silverman: It was a fad. On a regular bike, the back wheel is always turning, so when you ride it, you can stop pedaling and the wheel just turns. You can't do that on a fixed-gear, so you're always pedaling. Because of that, you can ride with no brakes. You'll see people without brakes on their bike. It's because you can slow the bike down by essentially back-pedaling.

That whole fad or fashion, whatever you want to call it, came out of bicycle messengering, because a lot of the messengers ride fixed-gears. It's just because they're low maintenance. They ride their bikes every day and they can't afford to have them break. There's really just a chain and nothing else. So that's where it came from, and the whole image caught on and suddenly everyone was riding messenger bikes around. It still persists today, but it's not the thing to do or ride these days. A lot of people ride fixed-gears today, but five years ago it's like everyone had one.

Barber: The bikes that you work on could be all types of bikes, right?

Silverman: Yes. We repair any bike. And people give us every kind of bike to either fix up and sell, or just sell it "as is" as a project. But, yes, we take anything, because people ride any and all sorts of bikes.

Barber: Was there a relationship with the university from an early point at all?

Silverman: No, and there still isn't. It's something that we've tried to develop but have failed.

Barber: Why do you think that is?

Silverman: I think there are a lot of reasons. I guess this is considered a commuter campus. There aren't a lot of people who live on campus. I don't think anyone in the administration really thinks it's a priority. I just don't think anyone at the university really understands what an asset it would be to push cycling on this campus or any campus.

Barber: Do you think you're going to keep trying?

Silverman: Yes, I know we are. It's something that we talked about yesterday and that I have actually pushed for since the day we started the Bike Project and that I feel real strongly about because I know that's where I caught the bug. I was in college and riding my bike and Western had a college bike shop, which was good for a lot of things, but even something as simple as just having a place to go on campus when you've got a flat

tire. Now the closest place to UNR is the Bike Project, but it's still a mile away and it's not convenient. I can't imagine how many bikes are sitting in bike racks with one flat tire. If that student could walk it to class, go to class, and then fix it afterwards, they'd be riding their bike again.

Barber: I saw you had a table during the first week of classes by the Union up here.

Silverman: Yes. Right.

Barber: And because of that, I noticed that there was a place to get air right by the Knowledge Center because someone was pumping their tire up, and I would never have noticed that except there was more of a bike presence that day around there.

Silverman: We actually had a little visioning meeting, a strategic planning meeting with the staff two days ago, and one of the things we talked about is trying to have consistent, almost weekly, workshops on campus, where people can come and get help or get their bike fixed for free. Obviously, part of it is to promote the Bike Project, but the other part of it is just to get kids' bikes fixed and get them thinking about it.

Barber: Let's talk a little bit about Fourth Street. You had a couple of other locations before moving to Fourth Street. Was the Bell Street one the location right before Fourth Street?

Silverman: Yes.

Barber: So talk to me about why you wanted to leave Bell Street and how you ended up on East Fourth Street.

Silverman: We moved into Bell Street, and the section that we were in was just a warehouse, and there wasn't a door. There was a garage door and it was in an alley. At the time, it was fine. It was a steppingstone on the path to Fourth Street, I guess you could say. But I think our landlord was ready for us to move on, and we knew someone who was looking at the space on Fourth Street, and they invited us to come look at it. It didn't really work for them but it kind of worked for us. So our landlord gave us the nudge and we picked up and moved.

Barber: What was the Fourth Street site like when you first saw it?

Silverman: It was a lot different. If you had seen it then, you wouldn't recognize it today, because we did a lot of work to it. For one thing, the front door wasn't there. It was actually a brick wall. The entrance was there, but it had been bricked over. So we busted that out. We put a new big window and put glass back in the door.

The garage door was already there because it used to be a transmission shop, so I assume they pulled cars through there. If you go next door, it still stinks like transmission fluid and oil. It's kind of gross. Our place doesn't stink. It stunk when we moved in there, but it got pressure-washed and cleaned, and for whatever reason, it doesn't smell

anymore.

Barber: So it and the storefront next door were connected?

Silverman: Yes. They were the same business for a long time, and the two buildings are still connected. If you go upstairs, you can walk next door. There's actually a door between the two downstairs, but it's been blocked for a while.

Barber: What's your address?

Silverman: Our address is 541 East Fourth Street, and next door is 545.

Barber: What's the space like? Can you describe it for me?

Silverman: It's a cinderblock building. You walk in and there's a really long, relatively narrow space—I think it's fourteen feet wide. The building is roughly twenty-eight or twenty-nine feet wide, and it's split down the middle. The west side runs all the way back. The east side used to be an alleyway. I didn't know this, but our new neighbors were looking at the plans, and the two buildings used to be separate and that was an alleyway, then someone busted out the wall to the alley and joined them together. If you walk upstairs you'll see the brick wall that used to be the outside of the wall next door. You can also see the big steel beams where they reinforced the building, probably when they put a new roof on and made the building extend to the other wall.

Barber: How did you modify it for your business?

Silverman: When you walked in before, there was a little foyer area and then two walls that ran east-west, and we took those walls completely out. We made the east side of the building one large room. There was a regular door to your left when you walked in, and we busted that all out and reinforced it with a header and widened it by about ten feet. Now, if you walk in and you look left, there's a counter.

Barber: What happens in the different parts of the building?

Silverman: If you walk into the building, the east side is where we store all our bikes. On the west side is our service counter and all our service workstations, and where we store all our new parts and whatnot. It's kind of our staff work area, and in the back of the west side are the public workstations and more bike storage. Then upstairs has the office and more bike storage.

Barber: Has the space upstairs changed since you've been there or is that how you found it?

Silverman: Yes and no. When we moved in, there was no one next door, so we had the whole upstairs, and then the guy next door moved in and the landlord, even though he promised us that space, gave it to them. He was going to try to give them the whole

upstairs, and I said no. I managed to save the office and maybe a third of the upstairs space. Those guys put a wall in. When they moved out, they took the wall out and we took it back over.

Barber: I would imagine it's good to have a separate space from the workspaces for your office.

Silverman: Yes. That place is just really busy, so there are a lot of distractions.

Barber: Do you feel like you're going to need more space at some point?

Silverman: We've talked about it. Yes and no. If we had more bike storage, we could expand our operating area, but right now we're just finding the balance between those two. But we remodeled this summer and opened up a lot of space. The workstations on the left used to be in the back right corner, and we moved all of it up front. The counter used to be in the back, too, so we moved everything up to the very front so that we're more welcoming. People were kind of confused when they walked in.

Barber: Did you have any impressions of East Fourth Street before you moved the business there?

Silverman: No, I didn't. I didn't really think about it much.

Barber: Did the location just seem good because it was affordable or did you look at other spaces in the city?

Silverman: We looked, but nothing really fit our price range and nothing was ever a viable option until the Fourth Street place came up. When we moved in there, we asked a lot of people, "Do you think this is a good place for us to be? What do you think about that neighborhood?" We got a lot of mixed sentiments. That was pre-recession, I should say, or right in the beginning of that monetary crisis, the subprime mortgage crisis, so things weren't that bad then. I think things were slowing down for Nevada, but it wasn't that bad, and the baseball stadium was already being built and there were plans to put that mall in nearby.

Some people said, "This is a great opportunity. Fourth Street is going to improve drastically." Other people were really pessimistic, and I kind of joined that camp. I don't know if "pessimistic" is quite the right word, but I'm definitely realistic about what it is right now and what it could be. It has a long way to go to make it a place where I think the public wants to go and hang out.

Barber: Did you have to adapt the way you operated in any way because of the location or the surrounding area? I guess the flip side of that is, did it allow you to do things that you couldn't do at the other place? How did things change once you got into the new location?

Silverman: The old location was attached to an office, and there were people constantly

looking over our shoulder to see what we were doing. Once we got our new space, it was all ours. As long as we paid the rent, the landlord really didn't care. He gave us free rein to do what we wanted with the building, and so we could run with it and do whatever we wanted, and it was a lot more feasible for a retail location. I don't think things changed much. We kind of were hellions at the other place. That's probably the reason we were asked to leave when we were. I think the biggest concern we had was whether people want to be here at night, and most people don't.

Barber: Are you open a lot at night?

Silverman: We're open until seven in the summer and six in the winter. But Fourth Street, as dingy as it is, it's really not a dangerous place, I don't think.

Barber: Why do you think people stay away, then?

Silverman: Well, they don't have much to do down there, with the exception of going to one of the auction places or the thrift store. There aren't a lot of attractions. It's a lot of motels and industrial businesses, and there's no place to eat down there. People aren't shopping and they're not eating.

There are a couple of bars but those are places that you drive to. You're not going to walk from a downtown bar to another down there, or from a downtown restaurant to a bar there. There's nothing in the proximity. I think Evans Avenue is about as far east as most people wind up walking from downtown. Louis' Basque Corner is right there, Lincoln Lounge is there. Studio on Fourth and then Abby's, and then the next place to eat, I think, is Casale's Halfway Club, which is more than a mile, and then the next place after that is Coney Island.

The only people who really walk down Fourth Street are the people who live at the shelter or who live in the motels.

Barber: Was the homeless shelter already in when you moved here?

Silverman: Yes.

Barber: And did that concern you at all?

Silverman: Totally. We talked to a lot of people about that, and just decided we're going to go for it.

Barber: And you're pretty close to it, so what has your experience been? Is there a lot of interaction?

Silverman: Yes, a lot of those people come to our shop either to try and get a free bike from our gift bike program or to fix their own bike or to buy a bike.

Barber: So there's a gift bike program that gives away bikes for free?

Silverman: Yes, the recipients have to do ten hours of community service with another nonprofit. We used to do it in our shop, but we're just too busy these days to take care of that program, and so we farmed it out and said, "You have to go to another place, do ten hours of work, and then bring a letter back."

Barber: Were you doing that at the other location at Bell Street or did you just start this on Fourth?

Silverman: We were doing it informally. People would come ask us for bikes and we would hook them up. That was always part of our plan, but it didn't get formalized until Fourth Street, because then we had a ton of people coming by, and once word spread, it snowballed.

Barber: Have there been any problems with that program? Once they get the bike, is it theirs forever?

Silverman: Yes, and the goal of that program is to provide transportation to people who need it—affordable transportation, because even a bus pass or riding the bus is expensive, and as long as your bike works, you can ride it anywhere.

We've been trying to refine the program. We hooked a lot of people up who just sold the bikes or would get drunk and lose them. Our goal has been, in refining the program, to really get those bikes to people who other organizations recommend, who can really benefit from it, who genuinely need transportation because they can't afford a car, because they have a job and they need to get to work or somewhere else.

Barber: Do you find that it's hard to monitor what does happen to those bikes?

Silverman: There's no way for us to do it.

Barber: So you might just hear something about someone selling it.

Silverman: A lot of the people who we serve are highly transient, and we don't have the resources to look after people like that. It's like, "Here's your bike. Thanks." Here's the next person. I think, honestly, there's a twenty-person waiting list right now for those bikes.

Barber: How many would you say you give away on a monthly basis or a year?

Silverman: It depends, but it's over 250 since we've started keeping track, and it's grant-funded right now.

Barber: Where do you get the grants?

Silverman: E.L. Cord, John Ben Snow Foundation, other foundations.

Barber: Do you have someone who spends a lot of time writing grant applications? That's

pretty time-consuming.

Silverman: I do it. One other program manager does it. We have some relationships with these foundations now. The programs are in place, so it's mostly refining and resetting. We don't have a formal grant writer, but everyone works on it a little bit.

Barber: Does that funding allow you to purchase new bikes to give away or are all the bikes donated?

Silverman: All the bikes are donated. What most of those grants pay for is the labor to repair them.

Barber: You must get a lot of donations of bikes.

Silverman: Hundreds a year, maybe even thousands. We sold over five hundred bikes in August for Burning Man alone, and most of those bikes came from Burning Man because so many of them get left out there.

Barber: How did that Burning Man relationship start?

Silverman: Burning Man has a Yellow Bike Program, which is run by a local gentleman we knew named Travis, who is part of the Black Label Bicycle Club. It's another bicycle club in town. We met him and he basically invited us. His job is to pick up and deal with every bike that gets left out at Burning Man, and that's anywhere from seven hundred to a thousand bikes a year. He doesn't want to bring them back, so he donates them to various charities. Burning Man has several semi truck trailers, and they fill those up with bikes and send them to us. We don't pay for the bikes; we just pay for the delivery.

It's a great deal. We wouldn't be where we are without Burning Man, without a doubt. It's been huge. And every year it's grown. We doubled our bikes from last year, and we probably doubled from the year before. We sell them all for \$55.

They're all super cheap. You don't want to take a bike out there that's going to get ruined. We get a lot of the bikes that we've sold back in the shop afterwards. We've had to rent space to store them all. We rented space last year, at 420 Valley. Since we got the upstairs back, after the antique shop next door moved out, we have all our bikes upstairs again.

When we got the second truckload in the spring, Travis said, "I'll hold onto those bikes out at Burning Man" for us for the next couple of months, so we don't have to pay storage. They're in a semi truck. Burning Man has a ranch that's on the other side of the Black Rock Desert, about twelve miles from the event site.

Barber: Do you have any interactions with the folks who were building the Burning Man temple in Spencer Hobson's building or is that a completely different crowd?

Silverman: Some of those people came over and bought some bikes from us, but it is a very different crowd, a lot of people who don't even live in Reno. You could probably write a couple of books on the whole DPW crowd, Department of Public Works. They're

the people who work for Burning Man.

Barber: Thinking about Fourth Street a little more, can you tell me since you've been there if there have been any significant changes?

Silverman: We've been there three years, so there haven't been a ton of changes. People were really optimistic when the baseball stadium and that mall was going to go in where the Mitzpah was, between Lake and Evans. They were going to build an outdoor mall there. People were really optimistic about that and it was going to be good for everyone, but obviously that didn't happen. The baseball stadium is there, and that didn't do much, considering that for a long time, you could see the tent city from the baseball stadium. Turn around from watching a game, and there's the tent city—that was a major turnoff. So, in my mind, it hasn't changed much at all.

Barber: Do you feel that there's a sense of community there at all?

Silverman: I don't know if "community" is the right word. I know most of the people on our block. People just go there to work, I think, for the most part, with the exception of Remi Jourdan.

Barber: Have you had any involvement with any of these business associations?

Silverman: No, and I know Mike Steedman has been pushing for improvements and Remi's pushing for it. Sometimes I feel like I should support their efforts, but I just don't think it's realistic right now. As a result, I don't go to any of it. Sometimes I feel guilty about it, but I don't think right now is the time for it.

Barber: What are their goals?

Silverman: They want to make Fourth Street a place to visit.

Barber: What do you think would need to happen to make that feasible?

Silverman: I think the homeless shelter has to leave the area. It's dead-set in there and there are hundreds of people who have no place to go, who just hang out on the street. If you walk or drive down Fourth Street between the bus station, which is on Lake, to Record Street, maybe a couple of blocks east, there are a lot of people just hanging out on the street with no place to go, walking back and forth.

Barber: Does that seem to be the majority of the pedestrian traffic?

Silverman: Oh, yeah. I don't think anyone else walks down there.

Barber: When you get walk-ins, do you feel like they're people who have driven specifically to your business?

Silverman: I don't think we get walk-ins, other than that crowd. I think people drive or ride to our shop. It's kind of an industrial area. Martin Iron Works is across the street and there are a lot of construction-related businesses around there. People aren't hanging out on Fourth Street. They usually go there to work and then go home.

Barber: How much are you impacted by the people who are living in the motels along Fourth Street? Do you feel like that's also a group that's walking around on the streets a lot?

Silverman: Yes, those people can't afford cars, so they travel by bus and they travel by foot or by bike.

Barber: There are a couple of businesses around there, like Louis' Basque Corner, the Lincoln Lounge, Studio on Fourth and the bars like Abby's. Do you see that crowd on the street very much?

Silverman: All of those places have parking lots, so I think everyone just drives down there. But we're talking about a car-centric community anyway. For me, most people I see ride their bike to Lincoln Lounge. That's the youngest, hippest place. Abby's is not a young crowd at all. Louis', no. Studio on Fourth, sometimes. That place is really hit or miss for just everything.

Barber: You have a pancake feed at the shop, right?

Silverman: Right.

Barber: How has that been?

Silverman: It's great. We modeled it after Bellingham. They used to do it in Bellingham on Bike to Work Day. So we just do it one day a year, and it's fun. We show up at five-thirty and start cooking pancakes on a camp stove on the sidewalk and about a hundred people show up. It's a way for us to show support for people who ride their bikes. We give away free t-shirts to everyone—well, to fifty people who show up.

We work with the Truckee Meadows Bicycle Alliance on that. They do a big Bike to Work deal, and this is how we participate.

Barber: How many paid staff do you have now?

Silverman: Six.

Barber: How many volunteers would you say you have?

Silverman: Consistent volunteers, people who come weekly—five to ten, depending on the week. There are also a huge number of people who we call every once in a while when we need help. It's hard to say. I don't have an exact number.

Barber: But it seems pretty busy.

Silverman: Yes, it is, and it's slowing down now that the weather is cooling off. But in the summertime it was busy.

Barber: What do you really enjoy the most about having this business? Is it what you wanted it to be? Do you want to do more?

Silverman: It's far surpassed our original goals. We're an advocacy organization, and we just wanted to have a shop. That was what we wanted, and now we do almost fifteen events a year to promote cycling, the cycling community, and cycling culture in Reno. Now we do two weekly workshops. I couldn't ask for a better job. It's something that I co-created and got to make, with a lot of other people's help, the best that it could be, especially for Reno, and the limited number of cyclists and volunteers that we have. I think we've come a long way. I know a lot of people have worked really hard. What do I enjoy about it? It's everything that I wanted it to be.

Barber: Beyond getting more support from the university, are there other major goals that you want to achieve?

Silverman: I would like to create, personally and with the organization, some kind of extensive public education about bicycles, teach kids in schools, create some programs for schools to teach cycling, and advocacy and safety and that kind of stuff.

Barber: Is there any other organization in Reno that does what you do or that does complementary things? Are there any other bike-oriented organizations you have any relationship with?

Silverman: There's the Kiwanis. They actually run a similar bike shop to ours. It's all volunteer-run. It's been run by the same people for ten years, Roger and Ellen Jacobson. It's on 2500 Valley Road. It used to be up on Comstock, but they moved. Now it's pretty much at the top of the hill where there used to be a fencing place and there's a skate park.

They run a very similar program. They're structured a little different. It's through the Sparks Kiwanis, that organization. As I understand it, when they started, their goal was to get bikes to kids. They refurbish some bikes and sell them. They sell a lot of bikes, actually.

We try to operate much more like a bike shop, doing repairs and that kind of thing. They sell bikes. They garner a huge number of donations. They've been in this town a lot longer than we have, and so they get all the bikes from the Fire Department and the Police Department and I think they're connected in some ways that we're just not. So they get quite a few bicycle donations.

Barber: Did you know about them when you started your project?

Silverman: Yes. We tried to work with them. They can be difficult to work with. We tried. We attempted to partner, but it didn't work out. So there is some competition there,

for sure.

The other organizations in town are the Nevada Bicycle Coalition, which is primarily one guy, Terry McAfee, who is kind of a lobbyist/advocate. He helped get the three-foot law passed. It just went into effect October first. The three-foot law stipulates that cars have to give a bicycle three feet.

And then they passed another law that increases penalties for motorists who injure a cyclist while driving recklessly. Before, it used to be kind of a slap on the wrist, and now it's a lot more severe. I don't know how much more, I couldn't say, but it's more severe now.

Barber: Is there any more legislation that you've been advocating about bikes?

Silverman: No. Some people want a mandatory helmet law. I don't like those kinds of laws, but helmets are a good idea. I think Reno needs a lot more bike lanes and maybe for the price of gas to go up some more.

Barber: You need the price of gas to go up. [laughs] A lot of people wish for the opposite.

Silverman: I don't even wish for it, because I end up driving quite a bit.

Barber: Some motivation though, some incentive to get on bikes.

Silverman: Yes, exactly.

Barber: Is there anything that you think you'd like to see not change about Fourth Street?

Silverman: I guess it would be a shame if they tore down some of the old buildings, because those buildings have character. They've been there a while. But I know that Bellingham, since I've been there, did a major facelift of its downtown, and they have a really quaint, cozy little downtown. They did a lot of redevelopment, and I think that's what it would take to get Fourth Street on the up-and-up.

I honestly think that the homeless shelter would have to leave and then people would want to have to invest in Fourth Street and make it a destination. Investment of funds, bring some restaurants, bring some more bars, bring some shopping, and make it a destination.

Barber: Do you think there are transportation issues that are lacking?

Silverman: I think it needs bike lanes, without a doubt. It's a major thoroughfare but it's not a busy one. It's actually on the calendar. It's in the master plan to stripe it all the way to Sparks. I think a lot of people ride on Fourth Street. I think a lot more people would if it had a bike lane. It's a straight shot to Sparks from there.

I don't ride the bus, but as far as driving, it's easy. You just get on there and you can be in Sparks in five minutes. The sidewalks are actually really wide, at least where we are. If you get farther east, it turns into a dirt sidewalk. There's plenty of parking. A lot of it is street parking, and right where our shop is, it narrows and the street parking

goes away. But if they restripe it, they always do parking, bike lanes, driving lanes and then a turn lane. So that would solve a lot of these problems, I think. They probably still wouldn't have parking where we are.

Barber: Is there anything else you think the city could do?

Silverman: My question is, does Fourth Street need to be improved? It kind of is what it is, and I just realized that sitting here. Why does it need to change? There are plenty of other places in Reno that are more suited for investment—even California Avenue, which is, in my mind, the pinnacle of what Reno could be as far as a little commercial, community area, and downtown has a lot of potential. Downtown is okay, although the casinos kind of eat up everything. But Fourth Street...it was Highway 40 but it's not anymore. People travel through Interstate 80 now.

With the exception of the bike lanes, I don't know if they really could do much more. There aren't a ton of empty businesses down there. People use Fourth Street because it's relatively cheap. So I guess that's the question that I have: Why take the biggest hurdle you can find and sink a bunch of money into it? Are we hurting for that much space downtown?

Barber: And you think it wouldn't necessarily make a difference to your business anyway?

Silverman: I don't think that I wouldn't benefit from Fourth Street being better. I don't think that at all. But I just wonder, why does it have to be East Fourth Street, which is obviously the dingiest part of downtown right now? If they're hard up for space and they want to try to make downtown that much nicer, I can understand just going for it—I don't have a problem with Reno being any nicer. I like this place and I could stand to see it nice, but I just don't know if that's the best place to focus their energy. That's the realization I had talking about it today.