

Liberty Bicycles celebrates 30 years of customer service, advocacy in Asheville area

By Nanci Bompey • April 12, 2010

ASHEVILLE — When Claudia and Mike Nix opened Liberty Bicycles 30 years ago they knew every cyclist in town.

The Nixes' first shop, which started in their home before moving to South Liberty Street near downtown Asheville, was among only a few bicycle stores in the city, and the only one catering to serious cyclists. A dozen cyclists would come out for rides with Asheville Bikeways, the local bicycle club the couple founded.

"We just started riding and had a great time riding in the area," said Claudia Nix, who started out riding around Asheville on a three-speed bicycle from Sears in the 1970s. "We knew everyone that rode seriously."

Today, things have changed. Cycling events in the '80s and '90s helped catapult Asheville's reputation as a cycling destination. Thousands of locals and visitors ride along the Blue Ridge Parkway and the mountain bike trails of Pisgah National Forest.

The city boasts nine independent bicycle shops, one of the highest numbers of shops anywhere in the country, and hundreds of people are members of Blue Ridge Bicycle Club, the renamed Asheville Bikeways.

Loren Mooney, editor-in-chief of Bicycling Magazine, described Asheville as a "gem in the East" for both road and mountain biking.

While Asheville still has a ways to go until it becomes a true bike-friendly town, the city now has a bike plan and is building bike lanes and greenways.

"None of that would have happened without us really pushing it," Claudia Nix said. "We pushed the sport."

The Nixes and their bike shop may not be the oldest in town, but the store and its owners have no doubt had a major impact on Asheville's cycling scene. The couple was advocating for bicycling before they even had a shop and have been leaders in pushing for the sport for more than three decades.

National recognition

The Nixes have received numerous awards for their work in getting bike lanes and greenways built, and to make cycling in Asheville safer. This year, the Nixes received the Clay Mankin Award, a national award recognizing retailers who make significant contributions to advance the bicycle industry.

"The shaping of cycling in Asheville, I would put in the hands of Liberty Bikes and in the hands of Claudia and Mike Nix," said Charlie Clogston, treasurer of the Blue Ridge Bicycle Club. "They work exceedingly hard to make cycling make sense to the community and be an asset to the community."

John Burke, president of Trek Bicycles, said the Nixes' influence extends beyond Asheville. Not only was Liberty Bicycles one of the bicycle manufacturer's first customers, but the Nixes were also advocates for cycling before it was in fashion.

"The Nixes were onto that 20 years ago and because of their efforts it's happening all over the country," he said. "They've made a difference in this community, and they've make a huge difference all over the United States. They were there when not a lot of people were."

From advocacy to bike shop

The Nixes got the idea to open a professional-level bicycle shop when Asheville Bikeways wanted to ride from Asheville to the coast in 1977 and couldn't find a store to buy professional equipment. At the same time, Mike Nix, who was then a middle school teacher, started fixing up his students' bikes.

"We would come home from work and there would be people waiting on the doorstep," said Mike Nix, who became known as the "bike guru." "They would be there until 11 at night ... We were either going to have to quit and walk away from it or open a store."

The Nixes opened Liberty Bicycles in March 1980, investing \$500 that Mike Nix had received from helping the state write a bicycle

education plan. The couple kept their other jobs before turning to the store full-time later that decade.

It hasn't always been an easy ride. The store struggled through the recession in the 1980s, and the Nixes didn't pay themselves for years. The recent recession forced the couple to cut both their salaries and their staff hours. Competition forced the store to move to South Asheville and make inventory changes a few years ago.

Today, Liberty Bicycles has more than 7,000 people on its mailing list. Visitors from around the country stop in at the store looking for a good place to ride. Some employees have been at the store for decades.

"It (Liberty Bicycles) really grew out of a passion for advocacy, for teaching, for touring and just being there for the customers," Claudia Nix said.

Beyond the store

The Nixes' influence on cycling extends beyond their shop. The couple, who both attended Warren Wilson College, said the school and their parents instilled in them the desire to give back to the community.

Mike Nix is the president of the National Bicycle Dealers Association and sits on the board of the League of American Bicyclists. Claudia Nix facilitates the city's Bike/Pedestrian Task Force, is active in Healthy Buncombe and other efforts to grow cycling in the city.

For its 30th anniversary, the store is raising money to connect greenways along the French Broad River.

"I always felt service to the community is very important," Claudia Nix said. "I want to feel like my life here on earth was meaningful."

The Nixes also formed the WNC Bicycle Dealers Association to combat animosity among dealers and encourage others to get involved in advocacy work.

"They've been a positive influence on the cycling community here," said Youngblood Haske, who worked at Liberty Bicycles for 14 years before opening Youngblood Bicycles four years ago. "I think they're kind of a leader in this market, and I think they've done a great job with advocacy. And I think they've kind of led others to follow in their footsteps."

Mooney, of Bicycling Magazine, said bike shops that become a hub for the cycling community and are active in the cycling community, are the ones that stick around.

"The bike shops that are successful in the long haul are the ones that really become fixtures of the community, which Liberty has been able to do," she said.

