

# Gladys Bikes

## Welcome to a new era in bike shops



Gladys Bikes owner Leah Benson chats with a customer in her popular Portland shop.

A delivery guy for the neighboring business stopped into Gladys Bicycles in Portland, Oregon. The owner, Leah Benson, was there to help him:

*“Wow, who owns this place?” the man asked.*

*“I do,” replied Leah.*

*“So you own this place with your husband?”*

*“Nope.”*

*“Well, I bet your husband is really into bikes then.”*

*“I’m not married.”*

*“Do you ride bikes?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“Good for you, honey!”*

This eyebrow-raising exchange encapsulates exactly why female-focused shops like Gladys Bikes have popped up around the country. Gladys is a women-focused, full-service bicycle repair and sales shop that specializes in commuting, touring, and recreational bicycle sales, as well as semi-custom bike builds and saddle-to-cyclist match-making.

In an industry historically dominated by men with chauvinistic attitudes, bike shops have a cultural tradition of missing the mark when it comes to female customers. Some bike shops have started to acknowledge this problem

and address it by trying to understand the female market, hosting women’s rides, and making an effort to hire more women.

Yet the antiquated attitude still lingers despite the fact that women are responsible for a significant percentage of total sales in the industry. In 2011, the League of American Bicyclists reported that women accounted for 37 percent of the bicycling market, or \$2.3 billion.

Unfortunately, stories abound about bike shop salespeople assuming women know little about bikes (or that they just want a bicycle to match a pink floral jersey).

One cyclist, Kate, told a story of going into a shop to reconfigure her well-worn commuter bike to a more upright posture because of wrist tendinitis. The sales guy asked her why she didn’t just get a beach cruiser. Kate then found a woman who worked there and understood what she was asking, but the saleswoman told Kate that she was only allowed to sell accessories and couldn’t help her. Disconcerted, Kate and her bike left.

A little bit of the Gladys Bikes philosophy might go a long way with customers in any shop. Their manifesto

claims: “You fit in here. We promise. We’re women-focused, not women-only. We aim to make everyone feel welcome and comfortable. Tell us what you want, and we’ll listen.”

Inclusivity isn’t the only thing Gladys has going for it. The array of creative events and groups that Benson hosts invigorate a community around the shop and cycling. Dress Like Your Bike Night inspired 40 people to suit up like their rides. Also, the Cross Curious Club associated with the shop educates and inspires women to try cyclocross racing.

Then there’s Saddle Speed Dating.

At this event Natalie Ramsland, fit expert and owner of Sweetpea Bicycles, and her pit crew quickly let cyclists try five saddles by testing them on short bike rides around the neighborhood.

This event complements the shop’s saddle library that Benson has cultivated. Yes, a saddle library.

To use the library, a customer pays \$25 for a library card. She can choose from almost 40 different saddles and has up to a week per saddle to test it out. When she decides on a saddle, the \$25 for the library card goes towards the saddle. Brilliance.

❁ Find out more about Portland’s women’s cycling scene and female-focused bike shops around the U.S. at [adventurecycling.org/gladys](http://adventurecycling.org/gladys)

Why haven't other shops done a bit more work to welcome the female crowd? That's the million dollar question. One longtime manager of a large and successful bike shop says that generally women don't buy products like men do. She says women wait for sales, don't choose high-end options, and generally aren't as robust consumers because they aren't as gear-oriented and are used to shopping at places like Nordstrom that are targeted more toward them. So financially it's hard to invest a lot in female-specific options.

Benson disagrees.

"Women do spend money on cycling products and really care about gear. But they are savvy purchasers. They don't run out and buy the newest thing because a magazine told them to."

Benson talks about the surprising number of custom bike builds that Gladys does, which means a customer chooses a stock frame but customizes all the parts and components. Women seem willing to invest in a bicycle and bike parts that will really work for them, from choosing a specific component group to powder coating a bike sparkly avocado.

"We're prom queen right now,"

Benson says, referring to her shop's success. Interbike, the largest annual gathering of the bicycle industry in North America, gave Gladys Bikes an award for "The Best Women's/Female Bike Shop" in September 2014. (Women's or Female, Interbike, which is it?) The award showcased Gladys as successful on a national level, not just with their Portland fans, and demonstrates that women-focused shops are becoming more acknowledged industry-wide.

## GLADYS BIKES OWNER LEAH BENSON

**From:** Northern Wisconsin

**Former:** Non-profit employee

**Favorite bike:** (she couldn't name just one) A 1987 Schwinn Super Sport road bike with a Miami Vice color scheme, a CCM 1976 Mixtie known as the "Canadian Schwinn," and an All-City Space Horse road bike.

**Favorite snack:** "All snacks. 'Snack' is my favorite word in the English language."

**Favorite saddle:** Brooks all the way.

**Favorite thing about owning Gladys:** "When you own your own business, the projects never end, but my favorite thing by far is the people who walk through the door."

**Impressive product:** "Cleverhood Rain Cape. It lights up at night like you

were in a video game. And it's hard not to smile when you look like a caped avenger."

**Impressive company:** Rivet, maker of leather saddles. The founder used to work at Selle Anatomica and has improved upon the design.

**Funniest experience with a product rep:** "This one rep came in and was showing me his company's jacket. The male version of the jacket had pockets but the female one didn't. He explained to me that women don't use pockets. It was all I could do to keep from emptying the entire contents my pockets out in front of him. It's kind of hilarious when reps (mostly men) try to explain the female experience to me."

Portland cyclist Elly Blue, creator of the *Journal of Bicycle Feminism* and author of *Bikeconomics: How Cycling Can Save the Economy*, notes the trend of women-focused bike shops emerging around the country.

"The trend isn't saying that women need special things or hand-holding. These shops set themselves apart by ensuring a welcoming experience and a positive tone," Blue said. "Clearly, there is a market need for this. Plus, when you visit, you know there will be multiple choices of equipment and gear that work for the female body."

Women-focused shops seem to have a common theme: they value creating an amicable atmosphere that enables cycling to be as accessible as possible to their customers. That being said, it

might be just as accurate to say that these shops could replace the description of "female-focused" with "people-focused," which adds new dimensions to just being experts about gear and products.

"There is a cultural tradition of bike shops to not be welcoming to anyone not in-the-know," says Blue. "Women-focused shops will begin to shift the whole industry's paradigm because the men who come into a shop like Gladys will realize that their experience can be different. Better." **AC**

*Ellee Thalheimer is a freelance writer and the owner of Into Action Publications. Her most recent book is Cycling Sojourner: A Guide to the Best Multi-day Tours in Washington. For more information about Thalheimer, visit [cyclingsojourner.com](http://cyclingsojourner.com). Twitter: @ellethalheimer*

**iron**  
**DONKEY**™  
BICYCLE TOURING

WWW.IRONDONKEY.COM

WWW.IRONDONKEY.COM

WWW.IRONDONKEY.COM

WWW.IRONDONKEY.COM

WWW.IRONDONKEY.COM

WWW.IRONDONKEY.COM

WWW.IRONDONKEY.COM