A guy, say his name is “Ed,” goes into a bike shop. He needs to pick up a couple of tubes and ask about the availability of a specific type of stem. He paws through the Rapha jerseys; he’s looking forward to the Gentleman’s Race. The sales guy lifts his chin at Ed. They had a conversation about low tire pressure for snow riding the last time Ed dropped by. Ed was in and out, a perfectly uneventful trip in between work and home.

Now let’s say that “Danielle” walks into a bike shop (and this is a true story). Danielle is a proficient transportation rider who pedals her kids around town, but today she is looking for mountain biking SPD shoes for her husband. The sales guy approaches her but cuts her off as she begins to tell him what she needs. He’s pretty sure she’s mistaken and needs road biking shoes instead of mountain biking. Before you know it, he’s not listening to her but delivering a monologue at her while not having a grasp of what she wants.

Then he stops. And he takes a step closer to her, so close that he towers over her. Her frustrated countenance turns to confusion. He bends down closer, flares his nostrils, and sniffs in two huge wind tunnels of air.

“Your hair smells so good.” Danielle: flabbergasted silence.

“Oh, God, did I say that out loud?” The sales guy promptly runs off. Danielle stands alone in the shoe section for a second, then leaves the store empty-handed.

Many women have satisfying, uneventful “Ed” experiences at bike shops, but most WTF (women/transgender/femme) riders have at least one “Danielle” experience — maybe not the sniffing part, that was special — in their back pocket. The main complaints for WTF cyclists involve condescending sales and service people and/or being hit on.

This dynamic was part of what inspired Erin Durkee to initiate Grease Rag, a forum for WTF cyclists in the Twin Cities, in 2007. Her friend, who was a mechanic and bike messenger, also inadvertently spurred Durkee. He told her that “no one ever hires women [to be mechanics]; that’s just how the industry is.” That made her mad. So she became a bike mechanic at Sunrise Cyclery. Then she looked around herself and wondered, “Where are all the women?” The idea struck her that women should get together to teach each other how to fix bikes without men involved.

“The inception of Grease Rag was a powerful moment in Minneapolis bike culture,” Durkee said. “We were able to be ourselves instead of trying to fit into a masculine paradigm.”

In 2009, Durkee left Minneapolis, but the enthusiasm for the group had already ignited. Currently Grease Rag organizes multiple Open Shop nights every week all over the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. Their active Facebook page has over 1,100 members, and they organize rides regularly. Any WTF cyclist can participate at no cost.

Open Shops are Grease Rag’s “meat and potatoes,” says organizer Laura Kling. These meetings take place at various host bike shops. For around three hours, WTF riders can use tools and equipment to work on their bikes with the help of Grease Rag facilitators who are well versed on fixing and maintaining bikes.

“It’s empowering to know about your bike without encountering the ‘bro-ness’ that tends comes along with the industry,” said Julia Winkels, Grease Rag organizer and facilitator. “Grease Rag’s Open Shops create an
opportunity to ask questions and have fun. And you don’t have to be a crazy cycling fanatic to come.”

About half an hour into Open Shop, the facilitators call a “go around” where folks introduce themselves, maybe share their preferred pronoun, and answer an icebreaker question like: How did you get your first scar? What superhero would you be? “Over time, it’s been powerful to notice the group as a whole become more comfortable with each other and with sharing personal stories and preferred pronouns,” said Kling.

With community building and inclusivity being central tenets of the group, Grease Rag also organizes rides that welcome everyone, including cis men (see Grease Rag Vernacular sidebar). “It’s good for cis men to be included in most of our rides that have a WTF majority. They are supporters, not the center stage — a role reversal that is good for them as well as the broader community,” said Kling. Men are also welcome to participate on Grease Rag’s active Facebook page as long as they follow the ground rules of respecting a WTF space.

The Grease Rag rides, which are beginner friendly and convivial, attract a crowd. The Full Moon night ride happens rain or shine. The Mother’s Day Ride celebrates anyone who has amothering role, and the Pre-Babes Wanderabout gets riders stoked the night before for the famous all-WTF alley-cat race, Babes in Bikeland in Minneapolis (see sidebar).

As active and activist as they are, Grease Rag is very different from a traditional advocacy organization. Volunteer organizers and facilitators dictate the direction of the group, and events happen if someone in the group makes them happen.

As a busy mom of two, Dana DeMaster likes the flexibility.

“I can be involved in online discussions or lead the Mother’s Day Ride when it’s possible,” she said. “When I participated in traditional bike advocacy and brought my six-month-old daughter to a meeting, my daughter’s presence made the men uncomfortable, and I met a lot of resistance and eye rolling.”

Moms, 24-hour racers, and trans retirees are all drawn to this niche that Grease Rag has carved within the Minneapolis bike community. The group’s existence hasn’t eliminated all harmful stereotyping and replaced it with rainbows. But the group is slowly chipping away at the mainstream, broadening standards — through fixing bikes, shifting language, and having fun in a safe space. And it’s making a difference in people’s lives.

“Since being involved with Grease Rag, I’ve been able to open up,” said Tina, a 66-year-old trans Open Shop facilitator. “After growing up in a difficult household and being in the military, I was used to hiding. At Open Shop, I’m known as the welcoming machine. It’s been life-changing.”

Ellee Thalheimer is a freelance writer, author, and the owner of Into Action Publications, which has produced the Cycling Sojourner series, multi-day cycling guides to Oregon and Washington. cyclingsojourner.com @elleethalheimer.