

Profile: Robin Bylenga and Pedal Chic

by Diane Daniel

Even before entering Pedal Chic, you notice the stylish touches. Flowers cascade from window boxes, contemporary patio furniture is artfully arranged near the front door, and the name itself is in an elegant typeface under a turquoise and orange logo.

“What I don’t ever want is to look like a traditional bike shop,” said owner Robin Bylenga, who opened the nation’s first female-centric bicycle store in 2010 in Greenville, South Carolina. She has since gone on to win accolades for her work with women, speaks at bike shops around the country, and is looking at ways to grow Pedal Chic through franchises or opening boutiques within existing stores.



In Greenville, Bylenga’s vision continues inside the 2,000-square-foot space, where customers first encounter racks of bright clothing topped by a runway display featuring well-coiffed mannequins beside shiny pink and blue Nirve cruisers from fashion designer Paul Frank. Floral motifs carry over to seemingly every product, from jerseys, helmets, and saddlebags to the bicycles themselves. Lighting ranges from contemporary hanging lamps to chandelier-like fixtures while the air hums with club music. The store, on bustling Main Street, is even noteworthy enough to be highlighted in Greenville’s tourism guide.

“Atmosphere is really important to me. In the summer, it can really smell like tire rubber. I hate that,” Bylenga, 48, said with a scowl.

Although the store’s unabashedly fashion-forward slogan is “Roadways are the new runways,” Pedal Chic has become much more than a place to buy the latest Shebeest jersey or Skirt Sports fitness wear — though it’s that too.

“We call ourselves a women’s empowerment center. We’re demystifying cycling and building community,” said Bylenga during a recent tour of her shop that was occasionally interrupted by customers coming up for a greeting or a hug.

The first-time business owner took cues from her own life before setting up shop. A longtime runner and former spinning instructor, Bylenga returned to cycling after a divorce in 2003. Craving a release from work and raising three young children, she started riding with a friend who had recently lost her husband to cancer. The women

trained for triathlons together, keeping each other motivated.

“Cycling became my thing. I discovered I’m a very, very strong rider,” Bylenga said. “Getting back on my bike was my empowerment.”

But shopping for a new bike left her feeling powerless.

“I’d go into a bike shop and feel out of place and intimidated. I couldn’t relate to what they were talking about, and I felt stupid,” she said.

Bylenga, who has a professional background in sales and a master’s degree in human resource development, ended up taking a temporary job at the store she’d purchased her bike from.

“Whenever women would come in, the guys would say, ‘she’s yours.’ I got to know what customers wanted. Half the time, women would say they just wanted a certain color,” she recalled. “During this time, I pored over all these bike books to learn about the business. What’s a derailleur? How do I spell it? That’s when I thought, wouldn’t it be cool to have a bike shop with chandeliers and nice dressing rooms and a clean bathroom, where women can socialize? Men talk about crits and gear ratios; most women don’t care about that stuff.”

What they do care about, she observed, was feeling at ease, looking good, and socializing, said Bylenga, who wears makeup and prefers heels to boost her five-foot three-inch frame.

She relates a conversation she had with a bike mechanic who was baffled by a customer’s behavior.

“He couldn’t believe the woman wouldn’t spend an extra \$100 to get better parts for her bike, then turned around and spent \$400 on clothing. I just gave him a look and said, ‘I keep telling you.’ Men want a bunch of bikes and a couple of jerseys. We’d rather have one bike and 18 outfits.”

Bylenga’s “aha moment” came in 2010 during a period of unemployment. She



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saw the first few words of an email that she mistakenly thought was announcing a women’s-only bike shop in Greenville, home to a strong cycling community.

“When I saw that, my hands were sweating and my stomach was churning. Afterward, when I realized the email was about something else, I knew I had to open a women’s store before someone else did,” she said.

She put together a business plan, chose a name and logo, and trademarked what she could. She successfully sold women’s merchandise at a bike race in Greenville and decided to take her chances at Interbike, the huge trade show held yearly in Las Vegas.

“I had a quarter of a 10-by-10 booth,” she said. “I had sunglasses, arm and ear warmers, and a rack of clothes, and I almost sold out.” More important, she initiated her first relationship with a dealer, Bianchi USA.

Will Mahler, the factory sales representative she still works with, remembers her introduction.

“She walked into my booth and said, ‘I’m Robin and I plan to open an all-women’s bike shop.’ I was all attention because she’d done her homework, and I knew the women’s market was showing great potential,” Mahler said.

With a local start-up business loan from Michelin Development, Bylenga opened her storefront in December 2010 with more clothing than bicycles. Now Pedal Chic carries several lines of bikes, including Bianchi and a full complement of Jamis models.

Mahler, based in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, said what continues to impress him about Bylenga is her ability to build community.

“Most shops will tell you about their business plan and how they’re going to generate revenue, but Robin talked first about how she was going to behave as a business owner and how she was going to build a following,” he said.

Bylenga traces some of that approach to her two years as a flight attendant with Southwest Airlines, known for its customer service and loyal followers.

"The culture of a business is everything," Bylenga said. "It's what makes us different from other bike shops."

Above all, Bylenga caters to female riders who don't feel comfortable in traditional bike shops. For that reason, they might not ever ride.

"My main goal is to get people out on bikes," she said.

That said, she wants to also attract serious riders, but knows she can't be all things to all people.

"I've tried to convey that we're not just a cruiser shop, but I know I've lost some women to other shops," she said. "Personally, when I first opened, I struggled with all that because I'm a good rider. But I didn't ever want anybody to feel not good enough or not worthy enough to ride. In my quest to make cycling more accessible to women, I've learned you need to meet women where they are."

Sometimes that means they don't know the basics such as how to change gears on the bike they just bought.

"One woman, I put her on the trainer and I said, 'We're going to shift and watch what's going on. We're not going to talk about ratios; we're going to feel it. And then we'll go outside and try.'"

From there the satisfied customer was off and cycling — in a variety of gears. Bylenga also relies on events to reach potential customers. One of the first was a fashion show, complete with 16-foot runway.

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Other gatherings include a regular "Sip and Spin," a road ride followed by a social; and a "kickstand ride" on cruisers headed up by R2, mechanic Robin Rousselle. The shop also sponsors occasional "Intimate Conversations," where topics might include bra fittings and saddle issues, and Rousselle leads "Women with Wrenches," periodic classes on bicycle maintenance.

"I want women to know how to change tires," Bylenga said, "but if they can't, it's important to at least have the right equip-

ment with them so someone else can help."

When asked if her focus on fashion and her belief that women need hand-holding could be perceived as demeaning to them, Bylenga seemed confused by the question, as if she couldn't imagine someone would feel that way. "Everybody is entitled to their opinion," she said after some thought. "If there are people who say that my business is demeaning to women, they haven't seen the look of gratitude and appreciation in the eyes of my customers. That makes my days so worth it."

Gushing testimonials on the shop's nearly 3,000-fan Facebook page are further evidence that the personal touch is working.

In 2011, Bylenga and April Lemly, founder of the "Chicks on Bikes" radio podcast, co-founded SpokesWomen, a networking group that educates, promotes, and supports professional women in the cycling world.

"As women in a male-dominated field, we want to support each other," said Bylenga. The group has gathered twice at Interbike, continues to attract new members, and is working on its mission statement and bylaws, she said.

At last year's Interbike, *Bicycle Retailer*

and *Industry News (BRAIN)* trade magazine awarded Pedal Chic and Bylenga a BRAINy for being the country's "Best Bike Shop for Women" after garnering the highest number of nominations from suppliers.

"Robin's approach isn't only to make it more fashionable for women to ride, she also runs clinics and does advocacy work. She really wants to get more women on bikes," said *BRAIN* editor Lynette Carpiet. "She has quite a different business model."

Different indeed. On this day, Mechelle Luster, a first-time customer, happened to wander into the store. She oohed and aahed over a collection of floral panniers, all the while talking with sales clerk Melissa Escobar about her recent move from Virginia. Escobar invited her to the shop's group rides, and the two women spoke about change and courage. Before Luster left, she gave Escobar a tight hug.

"Thanks for everything," she said on her way out the door. "I have a feeling I'll be coming here a lot." **AC**

Diane Daniel is an admittedly unfashionable cyclist and freelance writer living in Durham, North Carolina.

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