The name of the organization says it all: Black Girls Do Bike. Inherent in the name, of course, is the notion that black women don’t ride, which Monica Garrison, founder of the organization, acknowledged has been her experience in the past.

“I hope that’s changing,” Garrison said. “In my lifetime, I have felt that was the case. I didn’t personally know many black women who rode bikes. None of my aunts or anyone really. No professional cyclists I could name were African Americans.”

Garrison, 40, lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She started cycling in her mid-20s for practical reasons, commuting to work in sales for a cellular telephone company downtown. A bike trail led from her apartment directly to the front door of her office, an “awesome” trip of about 10 minutes. Garrison commuted to work on her bike for a couple of years.

“It just kind of made sense,” she said. “The bike trail was so close, and I love the outdoors in general. I’m either going to rollerblade or ride my bike to work. When you drive, parking a car is a hassle, and I was saving money too. You pay $20 to $25 a day for a parking garage.”

After a couple of years, Garrison moved to the suburbs and her riding dropped off. But then, in 2013, she started to ride
again to get in better shape and relieve stress in her life. Garrison said she was one of maybe three black women she saw riding on a regular basis.

“I thought that was kind of a travesty,” she said. “I enjoyed it and didn’t know why there weren’t more black women riding.”

Garrison decided to take it upon herself to bring black women into the sport. She set up a Facebook page that gradually led to a website. Within three or four months, she received a handwritten letter from a woman in Florida who wanted to encourage black women to ride there.

“We set up a chapter (in Florida),” Garrison said. “Other cities reached out. We’ve been adding chapters every year since then. We just passed 85 chapters. It’s amazing to me.”

Each chapter of Black Girls Do Bike has a leader, called a Shero. Once a woman joins the club, she is “brought into the fold,” Garrison said, by learning about upcoming club rides and clinics covering everything from fixing flats to buying helmets and from bike fit to great routes to ride locally.

Everything is centered on the Facebook page. Black Girls Do Bike has chapters from Anchorage, Alaska, to Antigua in the Caribbean.

“When I set up the Facebook page, that was the birth of Black Girls Do Bike,” Garrison said.

Now there is a Facebook page for Sheros only, from across the country. “It’s a powerful tool for me to keep the pulse of what’s happening on the ground,” Garrison said. “It’s a great place to exchange ideas. I tried this and it didn’t work, or it did work. It makes them better leaders.”

Although the mission of Black Girls Do Bike is to grow the community of women of color who are riding, the organization is not exclusive. All women are invited to ride. Mothers are encouraged to bring their children along for the ride.

Garrison did a count last year and came up with more than 25,000 members of Black Girls Do Bike.

“I was surprised,” she said. “Our Facebook page has 14,000 followers. Instagram has 14,000 followers.”

Until recently, Garrison had a nine-to-five job. Now Black Girls Do Bike is becoming more of a full-time job on its own. It’s set up as a for-profit company right now, but Garrison hopes to convert it over the next year into a nonprofit organization with her as the executive director. She sells jerseys, hats, cycling shorts, and other merchandise on the website; the nonprofit would take donations as well.

“I oversee everything, I’m a one-woman operation,” Garrison said.

The largest demographic in Black Girls Do Bike is women who ride on the weekends, according to Garrison, but there is a contingent who either already does longer tours, or is interested in doing longer tours.

“I’m one of those people,” Garrison said. “I think it’s fantastic — my love of the outdoors, biking, fishing, and camping, all rolled into one.”

Black Girls Do Bike has its own YouTube channel. Garrison said she recently interviewed a young woman on the channel from the U.K. who had traveled to Canada to ride down the East Coast.

“We stopped her in Philadelphia and talked to her about her trip,” Garrison said. “Touring is growing as a type of cycling. I don’t know if it’s just within our organization, but it’s growing.”

When she started Black Girls Do Bike in 2013, Garrison thought she’d maybe find 100 women across the country who would join, a handful in each of the major cities. She never dreamed membership would reach 25,000.

“The numbers are staggering to me, and we’re only six or seven years
in,” she said. “Every day there’s new interest. We keep growing.”

Garrison expects to go international in the next few years, if not this year. She’s had interest from the U.K. as well as countries in Africa. She wants to set up a youth program to teach minority children about cycling.

“Also I want to concentrate on our Sheroes becoming educators,” Garrison said. “They’re at different levels. Some are novice cyclists, some are more experienced. I would like all of them to be trained ride leaders. I always encourage them to get in positions in the community to become advocates on how cyclists move through the city.”

Celeste Adams is the Shero for the Chicago chapter of Black Girls Do Bike. She lives in Frankfurt, Illinois, a suburb of the city. Cycling is popular in Chicago, Adams said, with lots of clubs to join, including the Major Taylor Cycling Club, named for Marshall “Major” Taylor, the black cyclist who was acknowledged as the fastest rider in the world from 1898 to 1904. During that period, Taylor set seven world records for speed, including a mile from a standing start in one minute and 41 seconds, a record that stood for 28 years.

Adams found that legacy of speed shaped the rides put on by the club when she joined in 2016. It was not unusual for riders to average 22 MPH on Major Taylor club rides, Adams said.

“I felt like I didn’t quite belong,” she said. “A girlfriend got me to join. Even though they had some developmental rides, they really weren’t geared toward the developmental riders then. They make more effort now, but it wasn’t their focus then. I was intimidated to ride with them.”

Adams said the parameters for the Major Taylor Club rides were “very clearly posted,” and included a pace that riders would have to maintain, which was often very ambitious from her perspective. She did lots of riding off the back. Then somebody mentioned Black Girls Do Bike, which had a Chicago chapter. The only problem was, the chapter was moribund.

“Nothing was happening,” Adams said. “I would reach out and it would be crickets. No one would respond back.”

Adams quickly figured out that other chapters of Black Girls Do Bike were very active. She traveled to New York City for the Five Boro Bike Tour, the annual 40-mile, car-free ride beginning in lower Manhattan, and saw riders from Black Girls Do Bike chapters in Cleveland, Houston, Los Angeles, and North Carolina.

“So I knew it was a big thing in other places, but I couldn’t figure out what was going on in Chicago,” Adams said.

The Chicago chapter didn’t have a cycling jersey, so Adams decided to reach out to Monica Garrison to ask, what did she need to do to get a Chicago jersey?

“She said, ‘You have to design one,’” Adams said. “So I did that.”

Garrison asked Adams if she would be interested in becoming the Shero for the Chicago chapter. Adams said yes. Step One was to start putting on rides. She had a core group of seven friends who rode. They all led rides for the chapter.

“We had standing rides on our calendar,” Adams said. “We had to wake up the club. We had to wake up everybody. When I took over there were probably 500 or 600 members, but nobody was talking or communicating. When you got on the Facebook page, nothing was happening.”

Adams took over in January 2018. Now the Chicago chapter has 790 people on its Facebook page, and there’s plenty going on, especially rides. Adams took a lesson from her Major Taylor days, and made sure there were rides for novices, whom she wants to get involved in cycling.

“We have nine standing rides with three being true novice rides, five miles and back — if that’s all you can do, that’s what we’ll do,” Adams said. “If we wanted to get people on bikes and excited, we had to have a five-mile ride. That’s where we had to start for some. That’s all they could do. No shame. No guilt. No judgment. We’ll go longer next time.”

The novice rides are the club’s most popular, according to Adams, with as many as 22 people showing up — phenomenal for a club where nothing was going on, she said.

Adams, who turns 58 in May, did her first century last October in Maryland, averaging 15.8 MPH over 103 miles.

“Full disclosure, it was flat,” she said. “But I was very pleased with myself.”

This year, Adams will mark another major achievement when her chapter hosts the national meet-up for Black Girls Do Bike over Memorial Day weekend. One of the rides will include a “peek,” Adams said, of former President Barack Obama’s house, as well as the houses of other prominent African Americans like Louis Armstrong, Nat King Cole, and Harold Washington, the first black mayor of Chicago.

“We were lucky,” Adams said. “I put in a bid. There were other chapters that put in bids. We won the bid. We have taken a big leap. We’re excited and proud and honored.”

Dan D’Ambrosio is a contributing writer for Adventure Cyclist.

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PANKRATZ: LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

people out riding their bikes, we hold a transformative opportunity. Adventure Cycling will continue to be at the forefront of that movement as the world’s largest bicycle travel nonprofit.

In these times, I have two requests for you: first, support our USBRs campaign. This is the largest, most audacious bike travel advocacy program ever initiated, and we need you with us 100 percent of the way. Second, as our world changes and emerges from this pandemic, I need to hear from you on the opportunities and needs that you have as a member of the bike travel community. We’re here to serve you and to engage millions of people in the joy and transformative power of bicycle travel.

Scott Pankratz
Executive Director
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