

Restoring bicycles—and lives—in Memphis

## **Revolutions Bicycle Cooperative, a church-based bike shop with a social vision**

by [Elaine Blanchard](#) in the [August 11, 2021](#) issue



(Photo by Keiron Castellanos on Unsplash)

Gerald called Memphis his home, although it had been many years since he had lived in a house of any kind. He was a regular guest at Room in the Inn, a ministry of hospitality offered by local congregations. He was quick to help with chores like washing dishes, mopping floors, and carrying out trash. But getting to his job at a car wash was difficult. It was a long walk from downtown, where Gerald had his support system.

One Sunday morning after breakfast at Calvary Episcopal Church, Gerald was helping Christine Todd, the church's outreach director. As they handed out T-shirts and socks from the clothes closet, Gerald mentioned his need for a bicycle. Christine thought immediately of Revolutions Bicycle Cooperative, a ministry of First Congregational Church in Memphis. Christine's husband had an old bike he was no

longer riding. So Christine called Revolutions and told them she and Gerald would be coming by with a bike that needed repairs.

Revolutions bike shop is no secret in Memphis. It is the place to go to repair a bike and to meet up with cycling friends. For 18 years the shop's motto has been, "We're saving the world, one bike at a time." Annual membership costs \$50 and provides access to all the tools and spare parts available, as well as the support of a mechanic and dedicated volunteers. Although the shop has donated more than 4,000 bikes since it opened, its primary purpose is to provide opportunities, education, and support for the cycling community.

Volunteers from Revolutions offer bike safety classes to fifth-graders. At the end of the school year, bikes are given to students at nearby Peabody Elementary School as rewards for perfect attendance and improved grades. Neighborhood children can work on bikes and log hours in the shop toward earning a bike of their own. Summer camps at Revolutions are popular with kids in the neighborhood.

The shop receives donations of bikes and bike parts. These are refurbished—made like new or better—and sold. Project Green Fork, a recycling nonprofit, picks up any unusable parts. Nothing in the shop goes to waste. Walking down the concrete stairs to the basement shop is walking into a world where potential cyclists can get more than a good bike: they can improve their skills, learn new ones, and become a part of a community.

When Gerald and Christine arrived at Revolutions with the old bike, they met Doug DuBose, the shop's mechanic. DuBose put tools in Gerald's hands and taught him how to make the necessary repairs. He made sure Gerald knew how to fix a flat, and he gave him a map showing where the green lines, bike lanes, and maintenance stations are located around the city. Tony Brooks, a regular volunteer, gave Gerald a lesson in cycling safety. Then DuBose gave Gerald a helmet and a lock before Gerald proudly rode off the church's parking lot. He now had wheels to get him to work on time—and one more place to belong.

Gerald rode his bike for more than a year before he died tragically in a stabbing in North Memphis. Friends from all parts of the city mourned his death, including his new bike shop friends. They gathered for a memorial service to celebrate Gerald's life and his unique gifts. His name was called as he was remembered again at Room in the Inn's annual memorial service on the longest night of the year.

Revolutions began in 2002 when a 17-year-old boy, Anthony Siracusa, asked the pastor of First Congregational, Cheryl Cornish, if he could put a bike shop in the north end of the church building (see “Free-wheel offering,” March 9, 2010). The tattooed boy, who lived in an anarchist commune called DeCleyre Co-op, imagined his bike shop as a place to bring diverse groups of people together. He saw cycling as one way to help people take care of themselves and the environment. And because cycling had inspired within him a deep passion and connected him to supportive relationships, Siracusa wanted to connect with kids in the church’s neighborhood, teaching them about cycling and bike maintenance and giving them a place to belong.

Cornish and Julia Hicks, director of mission, responded, “Why not?” The congregation had purchased an 86,000-square-foot, three-story church building in 2001. When Siracusa made his request, all but the north end had been remodeled. That unused section had limited plumbing, no bathrooms, and no central heat or air conditioning. “Anthony and people his age were coming to us with good ideas about how to use all the space we had purchased,” says Cornish. “Right after Anthony moved in with bikes, the young filmmakers MeDIA Co-op wanted to make films in our basement. Artists asked for places to paint. Young people came in with their creative ideas, and each group brought their own brand of outreach.”

Siracusa brought bicycle parts, tools, and oil cans to the long-vacant basement. He opened a door and put out a sign. Visitors to the shop told other cycling enthusiasts about Siracusa’s place, which he called Revolutions, and within months there was a steady stream of visitors walking down the concrete steps to the church basement to repair and build bikes together. The cycling enthusiasts dealt with flooding that followed heavy spring rains, along with multiple break-ins and thefts. Each challenge was met by Siracusa’s resolve and the support of the church’s leadership.

Cornish saw potential in Siracusa. She was his advocate. In weekly chats, Cornish persuaded him to earn his GED, set goals for his life, and apply for admission to college. In 2009, Siracusa graduated with honors from Rhodes College and was awarded the Thomas J. Watson Fellowship. The fellowship allowed him to travel over four continents to study the ways cycling serves as a catalyst for building community. He later earned a doctorate in history.

In 2009, the cycling community began to find official support. While Memphis is famous as “America’s Distribution Center,” in part because Federal Express has

been headquartered there since 1973, the city has been slow to meet the transportation challenges faced by residents of its poorest zip codes. When A C Wharton ran for mayor, he sought to change that. His focus on sustainability led him to listen to the leaders of the cycling community.

Siracusa and Kyle Wagenschutz, who became the second director of Revolutions after Siracusa graduated from Rhodes, were active in Wharton's campaign. The two cycling enthusiasts knocked on doors and engaged their cycling friends in supporting Wharton. Wharton respected what Revolutions was doing for the city and set a goal to get Memphis off PeopleForBikes' list of the worst cities for cycling. Once elected, he looked for federal funding and other support for alternate forms of transportation in the city. The more people on bikes, cycling to work and to play, he figured, the fewer cars would be on the city streets, leading to less traffic congestion and improved air quality.

Revolutions, a church-run shop, has become the place to go to repair a bike.

In July 2010, a group of cycling advocates instigated a ride to City Hall to protest the city's lack of bike lanes and environmentally friendly transportation. When they arrived, Mayor Wharton came out to meet them with a huge cooler of iced bottled water. The mayor was jovial and good humored as he turned what had started out as a protest into an opportunity to announce his commitment to building bike lanes and his decision to create a new position in city government, the bikeway and pedestrian program manager. Kyle Wagenschutz was hired for the position.

In 2015, Wagenschutz was named a "champion of change" at a ceremony at the White House for his work in Memphis. During his time working for the city, Wagenschutz raised funds for the development of more than 200 miles of dedicated bike lanes and cycle tracks in Memphis.

Forward-thinking citizens had long advocated for the development of a trail across Memphis for pedestrian and cyclist use. It would start at the banks of the Mississippi, stretch east through the city, and end at Shelby Farms Park, one of the largest urban parks in the country. That project, the Shelby Farms Greenline, was recently completed.

In 2016, the Big River Crossing was opened. It's a mile-long bicycle and pedestrian bridge that crosses the Mississippi River, connecting Tennessee to a system of trails in Arkansas. Memphis also began expanding access to bikes through programs like

Explore Bike Share, which places bikes and scooters near bus stops so that people can shorten their commute.

Maybe it goes without saying, but Memphis has moved off the list of worst cities for cycling and onto the list of best cities. Wharton reached his goal before he left office in 2015. “There is still a lot of room for improvement in terms of [Memphis] having established itself as a city where cycling is normalized,” says Wagenschutz, “but the city continues to lead the country in the pace and scale of improvements it is making.” In 2019, Memphis was listed by PeopleForBikes as the number one large city for improvement in its cycling infrastructure.

All of this success can be traced back to Revolutions Bicycle Cooperative. “It would be hard to overstate the impact that Revolutions bike shop has had on the city and its amenities for pedestrians and bikers,” says Wagenschutz, from his home in Boulder, Colorado, where he is now director of local innovation at PeopleForBikes.

Maria Fuhrmann, director of grants and partnerships for the city of Memphis, is a longtime member of Revolutions. “Not everyone can ride a bike,” she says, “and nobody claims cycling is the solution for the transportation challenges in Memphis. The large urban sprawl can create a long distance between home and work. And then there is the summer here, with its heat and humidity. Riding a bike to work can make an employee a sweaty mess and create a workplace problem. But having Explore Bike Share and the scooters by the bus stops . . . that can really help Memphians with their last-mile connection when they don’t own a car.”

Fuhrmann’s relationship with Revolutions began in 2008 when she quit smoking. She wanted to avoid the weight gain that so often accompanies breaking that habit. She knew Siracusa and Wagenschutz through their advocacy work with the city. So she went to Revolutions and took a series of cycling classes. She saw a Sears ten-speed in the shop, identical to a bike she had been given as a Christmas gift years earlier, a bike she had loved and grieved when it was stolen. Wagenschutz taught Fuhrmann how to take that bike apart and put it back together again. “There were many mistakes along the way, but that bike became the perfect bike for me,” she says proudly. At Fuhrmann’s wedding in 2015, she and her husband made a grand entrance on a tandem bike.

Cornish and First Congregational’s leadership team have gone through their own revolutions in the years since Siracusa first showed them what was possible. The

north end of the church building now houses a hostel, a retreat center, a conference center, a community art studio, two theater companies, a music program for preschoolers, two nonprofits assisting immigrants, beekeepers, and a GED program. The food justice ministry on the first floor feeds an average of 600 people each week, serving a hot meal at noon and providing boxes of food from the pantry. The church has become a magnet for social justice advocates.

“None of these people or programs have been solicited,” Cornish points out. “These are people who have a collaborative spirit . . . Fight For \$15 workers, the Newspaper Guild, United Campus Workers, Pilgrim Counseling Center, Open Table Community Gardens, Mid-South Peace and Justice . . . these are people who like being together, talking and sharing ideas.”

Revolutions continues to be an engaging outreach ministry of First Congregational Church. “It’s a wonderful project,” the pastor beams. “The shop keeps raising questions for us. We’re always redefining what the bike shop is about. It’s good for us and it’s good for the city. It’s good for the environment, a win-win kind of ministry.”

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “One bike at a time.”*