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Lindork's Lists – Q&A #38: Dr. Heather Young-Leslie (Fancy Women Bike Ride)

BY LINDA HOANG



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LINDORK'S LISTS

Lindork's Lists – Q&A #37: Dr. Shazma Mithani

Note: this is the public version of my email newsletter Q&A that gets sent to paid subscriber inboxes first every other Sunday. You can get these Q&As in your inbox first by becoming a paid subscriber.

Originally published to newsletter subscribers on September 10, 2023

**** I posted this publicly sooner than usual as I wanted to help promote the Fancy Women Bike Ride!***

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Dr. Heather Young-Leslie, Researcher and Co-Founder of Edmonton Fancy Women Bike Ride

My Q&A with Dr. Shazma Mithani first went out to paid newsletter subscribers on Sunday, Aug. 20, 2023.

Getting to know Dr. Heather Young-Leslie (she/her):

demand that cities create a welcoming space for women to cycle and interact with the city in a whole new way. **The next Fancy Women Bike Ride is Sunday, Sept. 17.**

Heather works in academia as a ‘research whisperer’ (which means she brings her personal expertise as a researcher, and research grants success and adjudication to help professors be successful in funding their own research endeavours), while her personal passions revolve around feminist and environmentalist principles, and our responsibility to contribute to our local community.

Along with co-organizing the **Edmonton Fancy Women Bike Ride** with Nicola (who helps especially with the route and promotions), Heather volunteers on her local community league’s Civics committee, hikes and camps in the backcountry, goes birding and wildlife watching, knits and crochets, and bike commutes all seasons. She is also a fan of going out for breakfast, especially Sunday dim sum.

Learn more about Dr. Heather Young-Leslie below, follow FWBR Edmonton on Instagram and Twitter, and sign up for the FREE Fancy Women Bike Ride Sept. 17!!

Let's Dive Into the Q&A with Heather:

1. Can you talk about the work you do with Fancy Women Bike Ride (and biking in Edmonton in general / the local biking community)?

1. The official **Fancy Women Bike Ride** is a once-annual event. I can't actually remember how I first learned about it—probably searching “women's biking” on Instagram—but most of the work is done by the two Turkish women who started the ride a decade ago. They've made it really easy. I just signed up on the international website, registered that I'd coordinate a group of women to ride here in Edmonton, then Pinar emailed me a package that explained the history and purpose of the ride,

messages on Twitter and Eventbrite. The first ride—which was during the pandemic—was so much fun, I thought “I can do this. It’s just once a year!”

3. The hardest part is designing the route. **The whole point of a Fancy Women Bike Ride is to advocate for urban infrastructure that makes women feel welcome.** But because our infrastructure isn’t very welcoming, there are lots of women who are uncomfortable riding on streets. So setting a route that is public, visible, but also safe and comfortable for women leery of riding, is a bit of a challenge. Also, women who don’t ride a lot, may not feel confident riding too far or sitting on their bike for too long.
4. So we try and design nice places to stop, take photos, enjoy the city. I depend a lot on Nicola to help me set and lead the route.

2. Can you talk about how / why you got into organizing Fancy Women Bike Ride?

1. As I said, I kind of fell into it—at first I thought ‘it’s just once a year’ but then I noticed there really isn’t anything else simply advocating for *women*—all, any, women—to move around on their bike.
2. **Bike Edmonton** does great advocacy for safer bike infrastructure and policies, and they have a fantastic commitment to bike affordability. But they don’t have anything just for *women* (they used to have women-only repair nights, but I think that died in the pandemic).
3. **Paths for People** does great advocacy for neighbourhood infrastructure that is safer, more comfortable for people to walk or roll. But again, their focus isn’t on *women*.

1890s. It gave women—whether working class or wealthy—the opportunity to break free. Some historians see the correlation between the bicycle and the suffrage movement—the fight for women’s right to vote—as no coincidence. And city streets originally were intended for horses, carts, and bicycles. Women, the under-paid (including immigrants and descendents of slaves) had a kind of equal access to the city because of bicycles. Then the car came along, and that was harder for women and working class people to afford. Then we started designing cities around cars, and the streets stopped being a place women felt welcome (unless, maybe, they’re driving a truck?). So, it seemed like the original ethos of the Fancy Women Bike Ride—to get the Turkish patriarchs running and building the city of Izmir to think about women’s needs, to design and build and have policies so that women feel *welcome*—fits here too.

5. There are synergies with the kind of advocacy Bike Edmonton and Paths for People are doing, without duplication. We fill a necessary niche! Also: It’s just so refreshing and joyous to be riding with a big group of women, dressed up, ringing our bells, or showing off how easy it is to ride in heels. The huge smiles are such a delight, it keeps me doing it.
- 3. Can you share how social media plays a role in the work you do? Always just generally curious about people’s relationships, approach and experience / response to how they use social media and how it has helped their business (if it has).**
1. Twitter was really important. Facebook’s “**Yegbike**” group is good, but the **#yegbike** community on Twitter, especially the people who come together around **Coffee Outside** on Friday mornings at Ezio Faraone, has been key. Instagram has been a good place to share visuals –it’s kind of our repository–. And then I’ve found Eventbrite to be a great way for friends to invite each other, better than Facebook, because Facebook is now mostly

4. Can you share a memorable moment or ‘successes’ in relation to FWBR?

1. Year Two. Our first year had about 36 riders. But then over 120 signed up on Eventbrite last year. That was phenomenal! I was so excited when I saw those numbers I went out and bought a super fancy hat –something a royal would wear. And then everyone who signed up, actually showed up at City Hall for the ride. Amazing.

5. 5. Can you share a challenging moment, obstacles or failure in relation to FWBR? (or career/life in general?) And perhaps what you learned from it or how you overcame it?

1. In 2011, I had a serious injury and couldn't walk (or drive) for many months. I learned a lot about mobility and accessibility of our public transit and walkways. When I could start weight-bearing again, I couldn't go more than a city block without a lot of pain and weakness. I couldn't depress the accelerator to drive. But I could peddle my bike. My bicycle became my mobility aid. It gave me freedom.

2. Then, the years 2019 to 2022 have been really tough for me. Even before the pandemic and lockdown, the drastic restructuring and budget cuts that caused the Great Purge of 2020-2021 at University of Alberta caused so much anxiety and distress. We saw hundreds of colleagues lose their jobs. We saw the University of Alberta crippled by the province. That attack on the University and the way the general public paid no attention was really hard for me. I felt betrayed by my neighbours, by our government, by Alberta. I mourned what felt like the stupid murder of a great University, while the senior administration and the politicians were gaslighting us.

day. I would take my bike out for a lunchtime spin, or join the Coffee Outside people on a Friday morning Zoom, and that helped me let that anxiety go.

4. My bike really has been my mental and physical health ally.

6. Can you talk about perhaps a common misconception about or something that might be surprising for people to learn about cycling? the local biking community? Fancy women biking??

1. People tend to think “cyclists” are on a bicycle for sport or recreation. (We make jokes about media describing someone as an “avid cyclist” but never refer to someone as an “avid driver”). But in reality, a ‘cyclist’ is just a person using a bicycle. Most bicycle riders also own, and use cars.
2. Another misconception is that a cyclist is male and privileged—the lycra-clad warrior— when often the bicycle is transportation for people without a lot of spare cash, from the houseless to kids, students, people saving on car insurance, to elders on fixed incomes. Normal people. And they may care deeply about the environment and want to reduce their carbon footprint. Any maybe they want a quieter city that’s safer for kids (because cars kill way more kids than do bicycles).
3. A third, really big misconception is that car licensing pays for roads, and that bicycle riders don’t pay taxes, are not entitled to be on the road. We hear that *a lot*. The reality is, roads are paid from property taxes, the law thinks of a bicycle as a road vehicle, and since

infrastructure, to think of us as very, very quiet, slow motorcycle riders, neither pedestrians nor the Peloton.

6. 7. Can you talk about how people can get involved in FWBR and the local biking community?

1. The local bike community is a super welcoming, very diverse group of people! Start by coming out to **Coffee Outside** on a Friday morning. Even if you don't have a bike, maybe you're just bike-curious, come hang out and ask questions. If you're lucky it will be a day when **Dr. Markland** is there in his bike barista persona! Look up **Bike Edmonton**, buy a membership. Follow #yegbike on Twitter or Mastodon. Join a community league weekly bike ride. Alberta Avenue and Peace Avenue both ride Wednesdays, and they take a 'nobody gets left behind attitude.
2. Getting involved with FWBR is as simple as following and amplifying our socials, and coming on the ride every Third Sunday in September. Instagram & Twitter are the same address: @FWBRyeg. On Mastodon, we are @FWBRyeg@yeg.bike There are no members lists or dues. You're a Fancy Woman Bike Rider when you join the ride, whether you're wearing a Royal's hat, blue suede heels, or sweat pants. When we do other rides, like the vintage bike ride we did in June, whoever shows up are the right people to be there.
3. If someone really wants to do more with FWBRyeg, we can always use help with getting the message out to other women across Edmonton. The women who join the ride are a pretty diverse group (and we are not exclusionary about the term 'women'—we know trans women are women); some are new Canadians, Muslims, Atheists, women of colour, neurodivergent, teenagers to

city. But I think we could do more to ensure certain segments of our sisterhood—Indigenous women, and women who don't have English as their first language for example—know they're welcome and wanted.

4. We could really use the help of videographers or photographers. I'd love to work with a visual artist who wanted to get some funding to document the FWBR in situ, in our city. I'd also love help setting up a course for teaching adult women how to ride a bike, and how to ride in urban Edmonton.

8. Can you tell me about your hobbies! What do you do for fun?

1. I like to camp and hike backcountry in the Rockies and the Wilmore, solo trips especially. I like watching birds, fish, wildlife in general. I knit and crochet, both badly. I can spend hours hanging out in book shops. I'm a member of the AGA and it's my favourite winter hideaway. I watch design shows and fantasize about going back for a degree in design. And I'm a big fan of "the church of Sunday Morning Breakfast" which at the best of times involves dim sum. I love to travel, and have traveled to some very remote unusual parts of the planet. I just did a bicycling tour in the Loire Valley in France, and I'd love to do more, however I'm not sure whether that's going to continue because jet fuel is terrible for the environment.
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Wrapping up our Q&A:

- **What show would you recommend people watch on Netflix?**
 - On YouTube, I recommend **The Dutch Cycling Embassy** and **Shifter Cycling**. The latter is from Calgary, so it's got good Alberta context. The former is brilliant. The Dutch really are world leaders on making the city feel welcoming for its citizens.
- **Is there a book or podcast you recently read (or doesn't have to be recent) that you would recommend to others and why?**

- **What is a fav local restaurant or store you'd recommend?**
 - One?? Eek! **Clementine** and **Japonais Bistro** in my walkable space, **OTTO** and **Café Amore** in my bikeable space.
- **What's something about Alberta you love or recommend others check out?**
 - Alberta... Hmm. Not the politics! Hike the **Opal Hills in Jasper**, in July, for the wildflowers. And everyone should canoe the North Saskatchewan River in Edmonton at least once in their life, and look for beavers!

Thank you Dr. Heather Young-Leslie for sharing your story!

Click to sign up for the free Fancy Women Bike Ride coming up Sunday, Sept. 17, 2023.

- **Learn more about the global Fancy Women Bike Ride event**

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Alberta, who writes about and photographs / films travel, food, lifestyle and family topics. She's also a seasoned social media/digital strategist with a journalism background, the founder of the Edmonton International Cat Festival and co-founder of Stop Race Based Hate, an online anti-racism education tool. Linda loves exploring the world with her partner Mike, their Miracle Baby Benjamin, eating their way through cities, supporting local businesses, and experiencing arts and culture (like Instagrammable Walls!) Linda received the inaugural Edmonton Best Tourism Influencer Award in 2024, was part of Edify Edmonton's Top 40 Under 40 Class of 2021, and received the Spirit of NAIT Award in 2019, all in part for her work using social media and her blog to share about and advocate for local businesses, food, art, and more. Linda is also a fur-mom to three cats and two dogs.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This blog is based in Treaty 6 Territory, traditional and ancestral lands of many First Nations and Métis in Alberta. I'm a settler who lives, works, and plays in the Amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton) area on Turtle Island (Canada). I'm committed to reconciliation. uplifting and supporting Indigenous communities and one way I do that is by highlighting Indigenous-owned artists, business owners, makers, events, and other experiences here on this blog and on social media.

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