

Agency For Change Podcast : Jes Salvin, Marketing and Memberships Manager for Heartland Bike Share

Announcer

Welcome to Agency for Change, the podcast that brings you the stories of people creating positive change in the world. We explore what inspires these changemakers, the work they're doing, and how they share their message. Each of us can play a part in change, and these are the people who show us how.

Lyn Wineman:

Hey, everyone! This is Lyn Wineman, founder and chief strategist of KidGlov, and I am pleased to welcome you to another inspiring episode of our Agency for Change podcast.

Today, we're talking with Jes Slavin, the marketing and memberships manager for Heartland Bike Share, a nonprofit organization that operates a number of bike sharing programs, including Heartland B-Cycle in Omaha, BikeLNK in Lincoln, and Valentine Bike Share in Valentine, Nebraska.

Jes is a firm believer in utilizing the outdoors and getting active as pathways for personal and professional growth. That is so cool. Jes, it is great to talk with you today.

Jes Slavin:

Hi!

Lyn Wineman:

Jes, would you start by sharing more about the work of Heartland Bike Share?

Jes Slavin:

Absolutely. Heartland Bike Share provides sustainable active transportation and recreation throughout the Heartland Region, through community driven bike share programs. As you said, we have three programs that we operate right now, Heartland B-Cycle in the Omaha metro, BikeLNK in Lincoln, and then Valentine Bike Share in Valentine, Nebraska.

Each of these systems works a little differently. Up in Omaha, with Heartland B-Cycle, we have over 70 stations. It launched way back in 2011. So, we're almost 10-years-old up there, where there's a mix of classic and electric pedal assist bikes. Our stations have a good mix of transportation focused stations and recreation focused stations.

Jes Slavin:

You can find them in downtown Omaha, but you can also find a Heartland B-Cycle station out at Mahoney State Park. BikeLNK, on the other hand, has 21 stations, over 100 classic bikes, and we have five E-bikes in the system right now that we're demoing. Our footprint there is mostly downtown, very transportation focused. Then Valentine Bike Share is just a little one station bike share system right on the Cowboy Trail, super exciting, just launched this past July, and we've already had over 300 trips from that station, which is amazing.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow.

Jes Slavin:

We believe that access to reliable transportation and recreation is an equity issue. Most often, marginalized communities are cut off from reliable transportation and outdoor access. We're trying to bridge those barriers right now with equity work in both of our Omaha and Lincoln systems.

Lyn Wineman:

That is so cool. So, I have to tell you. Since you mentioned the Cowboy Trail, one of my husband's bucket lists goals is to ride the Cowboy Trail, and we love to go to Valentine, but often find ourselves there without our bikes. So, we'll have to keep that in mind. I'll report back to you when we actually make that trip, too.

Jes, I'm always interested in how people who are changemakers entered into their current line of work. I know you have a passion for the outdoors and activity, but could you tell me, how did your path lead you to this position, at this point in your life?

Jes Slavin:

It was kind of winding, but also a little straightforward. I actually grew up in the woods of Massachusetts, where I was always outside. My hometown was mostly state forest, but also very car-centric. I didn't own a car until I was 25, however. I started bike commuting while getting my undergrad degree at Emerson College in Boston, a great city for walking, biking, and using public transportation. So, it was there where I got really interested in the idea of bikes as transportation, and public transportation networks in general.

Jes Slavin:

I moved to Lincoln for grad school, where I got my master's in educational administration. I thought I wanted to work at colleges in a student life department potentially. And here in Lincoln, I bike commuted all throughout grad school and didn't get a car. I only lived a mile away from campus. So, it didn't really seem necessary for the expense of owning a car and parking. In grad school, I did a lot of research in outdoors adventures programs. And also participated in the Bike UNL student group, which led me to be kind of a full-time loiterer at the UNL Outdoor Adventure Center, where I climbed at the climbing wall and took part in any opportunity they would let me take part in.

Jes Slavin:

I eventually convinced them to be their challenge course intern for my grad school internship, which is where I really started thinking about how much I loved getting people outside and getting them active. Through those connections, I got recruited to race cyclocross with the Cycling Team here in Lincoln, which led me to volunteering with CX, our local cyclocross nonprofit that does free cross clinics and helps with local races. From there, I started volunteering with Nebraska DEVO, which teaches mountain bike skills to kids that are in the Omaha metro area and in Lincoln.

Jes Slavin:

In 2018, when BikeLNK was launching, I was working somewhere else but looking for new opportunities, and Heartland Bike Share was able to bring on a full-time marketing and communications person. It just felt like the perfect fit, where I could combine my love of getting people outside, my love of cycling, and my love of public transportation and bikes as transportation. It was just like everything came together in me being able to take this job, so that's what I've been doing for the last two and a half years, just living, breathing bike share. I already did a lot of bike advocacy and now I'm really diving into bike share, bike equity work as part of my job.

Lyn Wineman:

I'm going to say wow! I don't know when you sleep, Jes! You are so involved. I love talking to people who have combined their passion with their volunteer work, and then with their career. Because you talk with some really happy and inspired and energized people when you can find that. You're still fairly early in your career. So, I think it's cool that you have found that, at this point.

Let's take a deeper dive. You've touched on this a little bit, about how transportation relates to equity, and how there's a sustainability factor in biking. But can you talk about how your work is making a positive impact on the world today?

Jes Slavin:

Heartland Bike Share really, at a base level, allows people to connect with the outdoors and have a transportation option without needing a big buy-in. You can just rent a bike, ride it around, return it. You never need to think about the bike again. We are enabling bicycle trips that wouldn't happen otherwise. We're also creating a more sustainable world. When people choose a bike over their car, that means less carbon emissions going into our air, helping the slow of climate change.

Jes Slavin:

On top of that, we're creating economic opportunities for local businesses. There's tons of research out there that says those who travel by bike spend more money at local businesses. So, when people are outside of their cars, they're seeing those storefronts, they're going to spend that money, bolstering our economy. We are also, as you said, providing public transportation for those who need it most through our equity program.

Jes Slavin:

We were able to do a large pilot of our equity program for Heartland B-Cycle starting in 2019. We have given away free annual passes to those most in need by partnering with local nonprofits, who really connect us with our community members. It's a really great way to work with the community and learn what they need. And our library pass program that we launched in Omaha, where you can check out our Heartland B-Cycle pass for free. Right now, you can't because the libraries are a little in flux with COVID, but last year, that program created over 700 trips by bike that would not have happened otherwise, probably.

Jes Slavin:

With projects like Valentine Bike Share, we're helping with rural recreation options. While I've talked a lot about transportation, and that is a huge focus of mine, recreation is a big part of bike sharing. Our Mahoney State Park station that we were able to install this summer has had over 600 trips since install. That's a lot for just one station that's just by itself in the park.

Lyn Wineman:

I was just hoping for a couple things! You just gave me eight! Eight reasons that spanned all the way from connecting with the outdoors, to finances, to maintenance, to sustainability, to equality, to economy. I never thought about how bike riders spend more money, but you hear people saying, "Well, I don't want to go there, because it's too hard to park. It'll take too long." But if you're on a bike, you can stop and start, especially with the bike share program. It's even a little bit more flexible. Very cool.

So, how does it feel, Jes...how does it feel to share your love of biking, and recreation, and the outdoors with others through your work at Heartland Bike Share?

Jes Slavin:

It's absolutely amazing. I love the outdoors. I definitely do more extreme back country stuff that people always talk about, when you talk about the outdoors, but urban outdoor exploring is vital for people who are living in cities. Bike share really opens up doors in that capacity. It also gives you this mobility freedom that you won't really get in a car. That experience of going somewhere with your own power and getting in some exercise, it's really something that I hope everyone will be able to experience at some point, if they want to.

Jes Slavin:

I always think, "Why would I want to wait in traffic inside a vehicle when I can be enjoying the sunshine with the wind in my hair on a bike?" I mean, I do need to note that bike share is an ability thing. Right? Not everyone can bike. But we are trying to connect people to the outside, for those who want to get on a bike.

Lyn Wineman:

That's really cool. I think about all the times I've gotten in my car and driven to the gym to ride on a stationary cycle, while looking out the window, whereas I could have just gotten on a bike. Right?

Jes Slavin:

Mm-hmm.

Lyn Wineman:

You've opened my mind to that. Now, we've talked about a lot of really great positive stuff. What are some of the challenges you face, Jes, both in your role with Heartland Bike Share, but also as someone who leads change?

Jes Slavin:

In my role with Heartland Bike Share, one of the issues is the fact that we have a huge car culture in America. It is hard to change people's minds that bikes are a viable transportation option, but they really are. What we see is once people do find that buy-in, they're hooked. We have a rider in Omaha who doesn't have a car. He just uses the bike share system and public transportation, and he's done over 3,500 miles on our bikes this year. That is a lot of miles for even the most extreme cyclist. It's much more than I've done on my bikes this year, certainly.

Jes Slavin:

I think it's also hard when you're creating change to just realize that you're even making change. There's always that, you can't see the forest through the trees type deal. You can feel that...I feel that often. But you have to keep making those small steps, and I feel like bike share is one of those ways that we're creating small steps by getting more people on the street, even if we're not converting them into super cyclists, like that one cyclist we have. We're opening them up to the possibility that bikes can be more than just a childhood toy. They can be a valuable transportation and recreation option for people of all ages.

Lyn Wineman:

It's interesting. You and I were talking before we started recording about our mutual friends at the Verdis Group in Omaha, and Craig Moody, who's been on one of these podcasts. I know their company provides an allowance for non-car transportation. I think that's an interesting thing that organizations can do for their employees, to help create awareness for all of the great benefits provided by the opportunity to bike, or walk, or do something other than cars. I think in particular, in the Midwest, you had to feel this way when you came to Lincoln, Nebraska. This is definitely a car culture. Right?

Jes Slavin:

Mm-hmm.

Lyn Wineman:

But more and more, the transportation options are becoming more accessible and plentiful. So, Jes, what advice do you have for someone out there who aspires to lead positive change in the world?

Jes Slavin:

I think you should find a topic that you care about and try to lead in that area. Changemaking is hard work. It can be really emotionally draining, and you won't be able to succeed if you don't have a really strong "why." If you don't know why you're trying to achieve that goal, you're not going to feel really fired up about it. I am also a strong proponent of doing your research. I take time each day to read about bike share and micromobility news. I read research from Portland State University's Transportation Research and Education Center, and I also use Better Bike Share Partnership resources.

Jes Slavin:

I am a little biased. I really love learning, but I feel like doing your research is key to knowing best practices and how other people are creating change that you can use as models. But I also want to note that the hustle culture that we have is pretty toxic and you should be resting, as well. You can't just go 24/7, creating change, even if you feel it is something that is very vital, because you're going to burn out, and you can't give anything if you don't have anything left to give.

Lyn Wineman:

I like that. It's like the flight attendants say when you're on the plane, and they're reading the safety thing. "Put on your oxygen mask first before helping someone else." You have to be refreshed, and ready to go, fueled up with the research, fueled up with understanding your why, and then you can go for it and help others around you. Really cool advice.

So, Jes, you and I are both in the marketing profession. As a marketing person, I always have to ask just one question about that. How do you get the word out about the good work that is being done at Heartland Bike Share?

Jes Slavin:

I'm always thinking about how we tell the story of Heartland Bike Share. Bike share is a little harder to understand than personal bike ownership. Right? The Community Bike Project in Omaha, they do really amazing work, and it's a little easier for people to understand what they're doing. You go in, you can help earn a bike. You can get a bike. Bike share is a little different. So, when I'm thinking about how we tell our stories, I'm first thinking about what resonates with me about what we're doing.

Jes Slavin:

To me, bike share is about a mobility game changer, and getting active, with a low barrier to entry. But then also thinking about that audience. So, I have different pitches for bike people than I do for people who say they haven't ridden in 10 years. You really need a message that fits with each different audience and what's important to them. Because what resonates with you is definitely going to resonate with some people. Being as specific as possible to your experience is going to resonate, but it's not going to resonate with everyone. When you are working with a nonprofit that has very specific goals, and we need support, we need community support. So, we need to know what will resonate with other people.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that, because marketing, essentially, is a conversation. When you try to have a conversation with all kinds of different people, it's really difficult to get your point across and be persuasive. I love working with nonprofits. But sometimes it's hard for nonprofits, because we want to help everybody, to narrow down our message to some specific target audiences. In reality, you'll be a lot more effective if you target that message to who is receiving it. That is really, really great advice.

Now, Jes. I love motivational quotes. It's one of the things that fuels me. Could you give us a few of your own Jes Slavin words of wisdom, that could serve as inspiration for those listening today?

Jes Slavin:

So, I would say progress is incremental. Small wins will add up, but you have to keep pushing.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that! You know what? It makes me think of riding a bicycle up a mountain. Right?

Jes Slavin:

Mm-hmm.

Lyn Wineman:

Hey, there's lots of wins as you get all the way to the top. We should celebrate those wins. That's fantastic. Jes, you're doing some really interesting work with Heartland Bike Share. Tell us how people can find out more, and possibly donate, or volunteer with your cause?

Jes Slavin:

Absolutely. So, you should check out your local bike share system. If you live in the Omaha metro, you can find the Heartland B-Cycle System at heartlandbicycle.com. B-Cycle is just B-C-Y-C-L-E. We're also on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter at Heartland B-Cycle. If you live in Lincoln, you should check out the BikeLNK System at bikelnk.com. BikeL-N-K dot com. We also have Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Jes Slavin:

If you happen to be out in Valentine, you should absolutely take a ride with Valentine Bike Share. Go across that super famous bridge. It is worth the ride. It is absolutely gorgeous. You can find us at valentinebikeshare.org. If you want to donate to Heartland Bike Share, we've got links on all of those websites, and we also have a heartlandbikeshare.org website, where you can learn more about our nonprofit as a whole.

Jes Slavin:

Since we've talked about corporate riding and incentive programs, we do have corporate membership programs, where companies can buy reduced rate packages to get their employees riding. Providing bike share for your employees is a great way to show that you are committed to sustainability and, also, the health of your employees.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that! You are right. A lot of organizations, KidGlov included, are working on our sustainability plans, and that is a real way that we, as businesses and organization leaders, can get involved. That is great!

Jes, this has been so inspiring. I appreciate your time. It's raining today, but there is a BikeLNK station just down the street from me. So, maybe when it stops, I'll go out, and give it a spin. Let you know how it goes. Jes, thanks so much.

Jes Slavin:

Thank you!

Announcer

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