

# VOICES OF DIVERSITY IN SILENT SPORTS

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Over the past ten years, many universities, corporations, and non-profits have struggled with what diversity means to them. Moreover, how this meaning will improve not only themselves, but also define who they want to be in their communities. Their struggles reflect the same struggles Silent Sports have had trying to attract more minority and women participants.

As an urban studies major, and someone who grew up in a socio-economically challenged urban environment, I sometimes asked myself, “What is diversity?” My mind surely goes to being more inclusive to Blacks, Latinx, Native Americans, and Hmong. It also goes to being more inclusive to those with lower incomes, those from rural farming towns, and those from the heart of urban areas that lack natural spaces. Although we, as a part of the Silent Sports community, don’t want to think of ourselves as being a privileged, non-diverse group, we often fall into that realm.

Through active and influential members in our community, as well as businesses who see the need for change, things have been turning around. As examples, Trek and QBP (Quality Bike Products) began offering scholarships to train Women/Trans/Femme and non-whites on bike mechanics. These programs were set up specifically to get more diversity among the shops’ staffs. Also, DreamBikes, a non-profit 501(c)3 organization, began training mostly low-income teens to run all facets of a bike shop, from customer service to bike repair, to handling money. Since 2008, DreamBikes has refurbished over 10,000 used bikes, many of which went back into the lower income communities where their shops are located, making it a full-circle business.

## James Edward Mills

A Silent Sports enthusiast since 1989, James Edward Mills is the founder of the JoyTrip Project. He has written extensively on Silent Sports with a focus on inclusiveness and diversity in everything from cycling to mountaineering, a subset and a book he calls *The Adventure Gap*. He was a part of the first all-Black group to climb Alaska’s Denali Mountain (20,308’) in 2013. His



James E. Mills.  
PHOTO BY JOHN MANIACI.

background extends into all aspects of Silent Sports, from being an outdoor rep., to guide, outfitter, journalist, and photographer. These experiences have given him a holistic understanding of what changes need to be made.

“I think it’s important for us to realize that the things we enjoy doing outside need to be made available to everyone,” Mills said. “Because if there are those who, for whatever reason, can’t enjoy these things one day, we may not have them for ourselves. Typically, efforts to achieve access to the outdoors for the most vulnerable and marginalized in our community create better availability of recreational resources for everyone.”

As to what is needed to make cycling more accessible and inclusive to all, he listed these vital changes:

**Clear Signage:** This allows people who are not used to route-finding to find safe routes to school, work, or businesses. By having signs that show what is a designated bike route or path, as well as safe connector roads linking the two, people who do not have experience reading maps can often find their way.

**Designated Bike lanes and Paths:** These allow those who may not be comfortable riding with traffic to still utilize streets.

**Safety:** Having city planners think about the safety of those in socio-economically disenfranchised areas and how they can travel safely by bike is extremely important.

**Resources:** Create and support programs where we put more bikes into people’s hands who may not be able to afford it otherwise.

**Education:** Teach the history of cycling, and all Silent Sports, which includes how people of different races played an enormous role.

**Organizing:** Create specific programs that invite and include minorities such as Black Girls Do Bike ([www.blackgirlsdo-bike.com](http://www.blackgirlsdo-bike.com)) and Black Men Cycling.

**Attitude:** For everyone to be good role models and provide a welcoming, inclusive environment.

## Pepe Barros

A Board of Directors member for Madison Bikes, Pepe Barros also leads rides for the Latinx community with Balthazar De Anda in South Madison. His experiences, however, go back to his childhood in Santiago, Chile, when he first fell in love with riding at the age of four.

In Santiago, Barros chose to bike-commute to school most days from sixth grade on, and competed in mountain bike racing in the Andes. In college, he continued to commute via a route that was roughly an hour each way. This led to his local activism in trying to improve cycling infrastructure, as well as to educate others on environmental issues.

When he moved to Milwaukee in 2016, while waiting to get his work permit, he chose to volunteer for Vulture Space and the Urban Ecology Center ([www.urbanecologycenter.org](http://www.urbanecologycenter.org)), community non-profits that focus on getting people on bikes and out into green spaces. From there he worked with the Bicycle Federation as an instructor for Safe Routes to School. Upon moving to Madison, he continued working with the Bicycle Federation, but also volunteered for Free Bikes 4 Kidz ([www.fb4katl.org](http://www.fb4katl.org)), which places refurbished bikes in kids’ hands who otherwise couldn’t afford them. He also started Down With Bikes, a DIY hands-on mobile bike repair service, to support children and lower income individuals to continue biking in Madison.

As to increasing inclusiveness in cycling and walking, Barros first said that we must allow ourselves to think about how biking and walking are different for each culture



Pepe Barros, left, and his travelling Free Bike Repair Service.

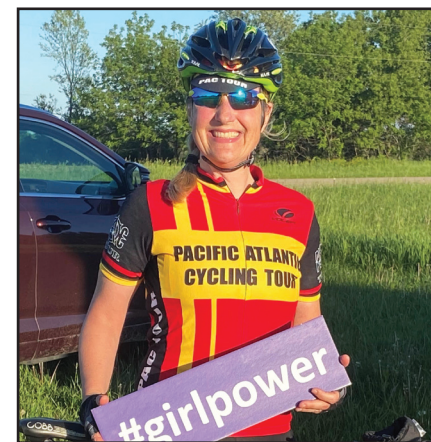
PHOTO COURTESY OF PEPE BARROS.

by going into communities to observe. Watch how people move and which routes they take. Only after careful observations should we then ask people questions on what changes they would like to see. When asking communities what’s important, find out how they specifically relate to biking and walking, such as whether for transportation or recreation.

Don’t feel bad if a community rejects your ideas or if your project fails. Be tenacious. Learn from your mistakes. Ask the community why something didn’t work and how it can be improved upon. This way, a community’s members will trust you and work with you. Finally, we must take the “whiteness” out of biking. This does not refer to just skin color. He urges people to read the book *Witnessing Whiteness* by Shelly Tochluk to better understand this practice.

## Dawn Piech

Dawn Piech is one of those people who has so much passion and energy that you feel it when she enters a room. Her drive to get others excited about adventures and introduce newbies to things like randonneuring and gravel riding is infectious. As a physical therapist, her roots extend deep into helping others, and calming them when they are nervous or unsure. Although she tries to help everyone get into cycling, her main focus is on getting more women and girls to ride through her program, International Women’s Day — Together We Ride ([www.inspyrdcyclist.wordpress.com](http://www.inspyrdcyclist.wordpress.com)) — which started in 2020 with 130 women



Dawn Piech.

PHOTO BY GREG SMITH.

from around the world. This is an annual ride on March 8th to celebrate International Women’s Day, and to reflect on how far women have come since the Day was first introduced in 1911.

“I believe we need to be bold, take risks, and step outside of our comfort zones,” Piech said. “We need to speak truth and promote diversity and inclusion in the Silent Sports we are so passionate about. We can all do better and advocate by example. I take an approach in that I try to conduct my life in a way that would make my future-self proud.”

Piech emphasized that white male privilege is seen in many examples, both in everyday life and in sport. For example, she pointed out that society believes professional athletes are wealthy. This is false. Even worse for women in cycling, for example, the Union Cycliste Internationale,

cycling’s governing body (UCI), allocates men a base salary of \$43,000 USD. Yet, according to the UCI, professional women of the same rank as the men, “don’t deserve a base salary.”

With this attitude, without a base salary for women, many female professional cyclists earn less than \$10,000 USD annually in their cycling profession, and must work extra jobs in order to meet the demands of life’s expenses. This is a hurdle most professionally cycling men of comparable ranking do not face. This leads to the exclusion of women, especially women with less-privileged backgrounds who are socioeconomically challenged. The net and inevitable result: Fewer opportunities for low-income women to sustain professional careers in sports. Among women within cycling, opportunities for indigenous women and women of color are significantly fewer than what exists for white females. This inequity reflects what exists outside cycling and sports, where the global gender pay gap is 66 percent, meaning women earn only two-thirds of men’s salaries in the same jobs.

To make positive changes, Piech said that, collectively, we must first acknowledge that disparity exists, that women, indigenous people, and people of color are not adequately represented in Silent Sports, including in cycling. Second, we need to become advocates for change and transparency. She recommended that we, as consumers, embrace companies and organizations that value inclusion with our financial and vocal support. We need to rally around the people and organizations that make our sports, our communities, and the outdoor industry better and more accessible for all. Third, we need to speak up and hold companies and organizations accountable to become more inclusive.

“We all have a role and responsibility to dismantle gender discrimination,” Piech said. “We need to be proactive in promoting diversity, inclusion, and equality in our wider communities, and to raise our silent sports and our society to a better place: Equality. Each individual deserves an environment without compromise, inequality, or injustice.”

After interviewing all three, I love the fact each person had different views on how we can improve. Yet there is a beautiful, common thread in each of their answers. I encourage you to think of how you can contribute to this positive and needed change.