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Streetsblog LA's Damien Newton: Everyone on the road breaks the law.

By Carla Hall

1:46 PM PDT, October 17, 2013

Damien Newton, bicyclist, bicycle advocate, founder and editor of Streetsblog LA — and owner advertisement of three bikes and one car — listens as I tick off complaints from drivers about bicyclists on the roads of Los Angeles: They blow through stop signs; they ride against traffic; they ride on sidewalks.

He's not surprised. Or sympathetic.

“Pretty much anyone who uses the road breaks the law on a regular basis. But people excuse their own breaking of the law,” he says.

He turns from the cafe table we're sitting at in Mar Vista (his neighborhood) and points to a car that just cruised through the bustling intersection. “No one was upset that that car blew through the red light. But if a bike did that, they would get upset — because they're ‘the other.’ For a lot of people driving cars, bicyclists are the others.”

[FULL COVERAGE: Sharing the road in L.A.](#)

He's right, of course.

Despite the upbraiding that [Streetsblog LA](#) can deliver to city officials or commentators defending drivers' right to road space (I've been on the receiving end of a tart rejoinder), its founding editor is less *enfant terrible* than amused observer of L.A. as it struggles to become a road-sharing city of drivers, bicyclists, mass transit users and, oh, pedestrians.

He doesn't care if you're on a bike; he cares that you stop thinking of bicyclists as an odd nuisance — and stop framing the debate as “drivers vs. bicyclists”:

“The subtext is ‘We need to get along with these weirdos, because they're out there.’ ”

It helps his message that he's not particularly weird himself. He's 36, married to an engineer and a father of two small children. He cheers the new state law requiring drivers to stay three feet away from bicyclists, but he's not going to be the purist with a yardstick attached to his bike to make sure motorists are observing the law.

“It would wreck my balance,” he says. I laugh. But I think he means it.

“I'm not a *bike* bike guy. I couldn't take a broken bike and fix it.” He momentarily worries someone might get

the wrong impression and leans into my tape recorder. “I can totally fix my own tire,” he says firmly.

“I’m a policy guy. A planner. A wonk.”

Newton had been the New Jersey coordinator for a New York transportation reform group — “unlike anything we have here in L.A.” — that advocated for more funding for bike lanes and mass transit. When he moved here in 2008, he quickly figured out the local politics. “A lot of bicycle advocates went to the city’s bicycle advisory committee and pushed them to do more. But — they’re volunteers! And it’s an advisory committee. I never thought that was the place to be yelling and screaming. At the same time, you’d go to City Council transportation committee meetings and they’d be empty.”

So he started going to those transportation committee meetings for Streetsblog. He would lobby Councilwoman Wendy Greuel as she walked to the meetings from her office. He would stalk Councilman Bill Rosendahl at the local Whole Foods. Rosendahl became a champion of bicyclists’ causes.

Newton has witnessed the change in L.A. from a city with little understanding of bicyclists to a city with a bicycle plan and more lanes, paths, sharrows and bicycle-friendly streets than ever before. But it’s taken a while to get people to understand that bicyclists need an infrastructure of bikeways, just like drivers need connecting roads.

“In 2011 the city [installed] 20 miles of shared bike lanes. They were like, ‘Here’s 20 miles of stuff! Aren’t you happy?’ We were like, ‘Not really.’ It wasn’t part of a system. It was 20 miles of stuff. Better than nothing, sure. But we would have preferred eight miles of bike lanes that are part of a network.”

He’s had his moments as the angry bicyclist. “I was once biking up Fairfax and a car hit my handlebars.” He wasn’t hurt. “But then at the light, I tried to get the person’s attention — like, ‘Hey, you hit me and drove away.’ And he looked at me like, ‘What are you talking about?’ I was so mad. I took my helmet off and hit the hood with it.” That was five years ago. He’s mortified now.

“I’m really embarrassed I lost my cool. It’s not safe to be on the road that angry. That person probably still doesn’t realize what actually happened. He’s going to read this and say, ‘Oh — random angry dude on a bike. Now I shouldn’t be so angry! I hit him with my car first!’ ”

ALSO:

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This post is part of an ongoing conversation to explore how the city’s cyclists, drivers and pedestrians share and compete for road space, and to consider policy choices that keep people safe and traffic flowing. For more: latimes.com/roadshare and [#roadshareLA](https://twitter.com/roadshareLA).

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