

## *Hitting Home: Transportation to Transform Turlock*

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On a foggy January morning, I hopped on my bicycle as usual and was quickly on my way to volunteer in a fifth-grade classroom across town at an elementary school in Turlock, California. I was headed back for the first day of school after returning from the winter break. I was in my happy place – wind blowing through my long blonde hair, legs spinning to my own rhythm – and I felt a sense of inner peace. I high-fived an older brother biking with his younger sister as they crossed traffic at a busy intersection, and I exchanged smiles with a mother walking her daughter to her kindergarten class.

During my commute, I was also surrounded by the vast number of people in what often appears to me to be the self-imposed prisons of their own cars, people who are not able to experience the crispness of the air against their own skin. In that moment, I realized I needed to become a part of something more. So, I became committed to developing a service-learning project that would help me to understand and address the challenges facing students who are commuting to school and to become an advocate to make the streets of Turlock safer for all.

While I was often jealous of my peers who traveled across foreign nations and worked to improve communities abroad, I realized I had the opportunity to play a vital role in transforming the place I had called home for so many years. Turlock, a relatively small city in the middle of California's Central Valley, was lacking the necessary infrastructure and educational outreach programs that would enable a larger percentage of its people to access active transportation methods. At the time of the project, Turlock had not previously created an Active Transportation Plan (ATP) for the city. An ATP is an essential part of the planning process, as it helps to ensure that the needs of active transportation users are being met in ongoing development projects. The lack of an Active Transportation Plan was apparent as many heavily traveled roads lacked bike lanes, and sidewalks were often not continuous – forcing pedestrians to walk on dirt paths or in the car's lane of travel. Sparked by interest, and fueled with passion, I was given the opportunity to develop a service-learning project within Bike Turlock, a local and rapidly growing bike advocacy group.

Bike Turlock began as a grassroots organization in Turlock to help make the city a safer community for active transportation users. When I realized that my own vision for Turlock aligned with the goals Bike Turlock had set out to achieve, I contacted the founder, Elizabeth Claes, to discuss my desire to complete a service-learning project in the community. After working with Elizabeth and multiple professors at CSU-Stanislaus to develop an original service-learning project, I was fortunate to propose my ideas to the university and I received grant funding from CSU-Stanislaus that would allow me to put my ideas for my service-learning project into action. My service-learning project would ultimately allow me to develop a set of "Bike to School Day" events at local elementary schools. These events would help me to understand the transportation related needs that students faced so I could be a better advocate for the change that needed to occur.

I was drawn to develop this service-learning project, because I believed it would add to the growing vision of Turlock. I strived to create a project that would help me add to the sense of community, continuity, and belonging that becomes central to one's identity, and in this case, the identity of the residents of Turlock. I specifically wanted to work with elementary students, as I

saw it as the opportunity to add to the cultural legacy that is the product of well-designed cities, including communities centered around alternative transportation.

After months of careful planning and community outreach, I looked forward to the first of my planned events – Bike to School Day – on May 6<sup>th</sup> where students in Turlock would participate in an annual national activity that I hoped would encourage elementary students to ride their bikes to school and increase bicycle safety through: a bike obstacle course, games, school-wide assemblies, and activities teaching students proper bike safety. I was most excited about the “bike trains” activity in which students would join at designated locations and ride together with parents, volunteers, and a certified bike instructor to their respective school sites and then participate in the Bike to School Day festivities. After receiving the necessary approval through both the California State University and the school sites, I was able to relax and anticipate the exciting events ahead. Knowing the plans and details were clearly orchestrated, my soul was singing.

Unexpectedly, though, the project I had worked on so tirelessly was put to a halt. I received a phone call informing me that each of the events I had planned was rejected by the Turlock School District. I was stunned that these events were not embraced by the school district, even though I had followed all of the necessary protocols. Aiming to understand why the Bike to School Day event was put to a stop, I was informed that the rejection was for a myriad of reasons, including: a lack of existing sidewalks around schools for students to ride their bikes on, that the proposed route was too far for children to travel, and various other liability concerns.

Immediately, I wanted to respond with frustration, angered the district did not understand that bikes do not typically ride on sidewalks, that the proposed route was in reality not that long, and that the planned bike train would be a leisurely ride. Instead, I calmly realized I could respond in one of two different ways: to give in, give up, and bring my project to a close, or to shift gears and reevaluate how I would develop a different, but stronger service-learning project.

Sometimes shifting gears is tough, but I ultimately chose to change directions and critically analyze what I could do to reach the goals I had set. I decided to dive deeper and learn more about my community by seeking first-hand knowledge about the challenges that active transportation users face. It was here that I learned how adaptable a service-learning project can be. I realized that if I wanted to better understand the challenges surrounding active transportation in Turlock, I would need to go into the schools to see firsthand what needs to be done to make active transportation safer for students. I decided to survey parents to better understand the perceptions parents have of allowing their children to participate in active transportation. Understanding the perceptions parents have was critical, as those opinions helped me understand the needs that we would have to address as Elizabeth, Bike Turlock, and I worked together to develop a plan to communicate the community needs to the city planners and engineers.

Embarking on this new part of my project, I felt guilty that I had not previously understood the true perceptions of biking by parents. I had my opinions on what would be beneficial for the transportation infrastructure around each school, but after reflecting, I realized I never had bicycled extensively around the schools where the parents had the deepest concerns about allowing children to bicycle. Here began the critical learning portion of my project, to abandon my perceived beliefs, and replace them with the knowledge of those with the greatest understanding of the needs. With this intent, I attended Parent Teacher Association meetings, and—working directly with my faculty mentor, Dr. Gerard Wellman—developed an extensive

survey and distributed it to thousands of local parents. Beyond that, I listened with open ears to the dozens of stories from every school.

Listening to story after story, I realized they all rang to the same tune. Parents were concerned with Turlock's lack of consideration to bicyclists and pedestrians in its transportation planning, and due to many factors, parents expressed concern with allowing their children to bicycle on the streets. When I met with parents at a Parent Teacher Association meeting, I heard the testimony of the older brother who bicycles with his younger sister to and from school every day. Both of their parents work long hours, leaving them with bicycling as their only option; however, the brother feels it is not safe for his younger sister to bicycle by herself on the dirt shoulder of the heavily traveled road that lacks bike lanes and sidewalks. I also heard the story of a mother who now walks with her daughter to school after her daughter was injured from tripping on poorly maintained, uneven sidewalks. Hearing these stories, and analyzing the results from my surveys, I learned that I could be an advocate for the students in these underrepresented communities by communicating their concerns to legislators and policymakers.

After forming relationships with the students and parents, I was drawn to amplify the voices of these communities. I conducted meetings with legislators and their staff at the Sacramento Capitol building, as a part of California Bike Advocacy Day, to tell the stories of the active transportation users in my community and to communicate the necessity of increased bicycle infrastructure funding. I was also able to go full speed into the revised service portion of my project by having efficient outreach events at various public community gatherings. Working closely with Elizabeth, we developed a strategy to reach elementary students and help share the benefits of active transportation with them. One of the most successful components of the service-learning project was holding discussions and having activities at large community events, such as the local farmers market, which served as a way to communicate with both children and families and to share the benefits of active transportation in an engaging and positive way. Additionally, instead of organizing a student bike train as originally planned, I was involved in a bike train where teachers gathered and rode their bikes to the schools together, which in the long term, will aim to encourage more students to participate in active transportation.

The impact of the advocacy work is already starting to emerge, as Turlock is seeking opportunities to involve community members in the future planning process of the city by holding public comment meetings that solicit the input of the community in the transportation plan for the city. Attending these meetings, I heard for the first time city officials discuss improvement projects to benefit active transportation users around schools, making Turlock a safer community for all. Although these are preliminary discussions and proposals, through the continuation of university students becoming engaged with the community and involved in service-learning projects, the momentum will continue.

True service learning projects occur when one becomes fully immersed in a community and, through the project, is able to provide service while obtaining new knowledge. Service can take many different forms, and my service learning project was successful in providing service by listening to the transportation needs of the community and working to advocate on its behalf.

While my setbacks were unforeseen and presented obstacles, without my project being challenged, I would have been unable to experience the critically important learning portion that occurred. My revised project allowed me to provide service to and learn a great deal about my community. This journey has also caused me to realize that service learning projects are not temporary endeavors, but part of an ongoing process that can change and grow as one tackles larger issues. Not only did my service-learning project allow me to build valuable relationships

with Elizabeth and Dr. Wellman that will help me in my future, more importantly, I was able to build a relationship with my community. This project had me working *with* the community, *for* the community, which left me with the tools and understanding of how to build a stronger Turlock. These newly acquired skills will provide the foundation for me to build on as I will continue to work to improve active transportation in Turlock.

Although the route of my project may have changed, the destination remained the same: to help make Turlock a more vibrant city with a robust active transportation system. Seeing how impactful transportation transformations can be on communities, I am grateful for how much this project has given me, including laying the foundation for my future academic and career goals. This is just the beginning to a long journey ahead, but from this project, I have learned much more than I previously had imagined to be possible. I know I will forever work to remain a part of the process to make cities stronger. Realizing how far Turlock has already come, and the potential for impactful change in the future, I will always look back and be proud to call Turlock my hometown.

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I would like to thank everyone who bikes for transportation in Turlock for inspiring me every day. I also would like to give appreciation to Elizabeth Claes for her dedication to improving bicycling in Turlock and for helping me with my service-learning project. Finally, I owe special gratitude to my faculty mentor, Dr. Gerard Wellman, who helped me to find my love for studying transportation.