



Pedal City

A weekly bike ride dispels a neighborhood's rough reputation in Detroit, MI

Story by Erica J. Hobbs • For the December 2016 – January 2017

Brenda Roxborough, a short, gray-haired African-American woman, stands on the side of the road outside her house near Detroit's Boston-Edison district, waving frantically at the clusters of bicyclists rolling by.

“Welcome to the D!” she shouts.

It's Monday night, which in Detroit means Slow Roll, the city's weekly bike ride. Attracting as many as 4,000 riders each week—from grannies to hipsters, bankers to hip-hop musicians—it has grown to become one of the largest bike rides in the world.

Roxborough, 68, who as a lifelong Detroiter has borne witness to the exuberance of the Motown years and the city's recent bankruptcy, sees Slow Roll as a sign that things are looking up. “Sometimes you can't even get workers to come and work on your house,” she says. “Just to see people of all colors coming to Detroit, it makes me feel good.”

The ride, which debuted in 2010, is a festive affair, the bikes festooned with blinking lights and tassels, some fitted with sound systems, others pulling trailers carrying kids or dogs.

On their way to Roxborough's neighborhood, the riders cruise through the notoriously troubled area known as the Cass Corridor, rebranded in recent years as “Midtown.” Near lots strewn with broken glass and other debris, they pass men and women outside a homeless services center, lounging in chairs beneath a sycamore tree.

Farther on, closer to Wayne State University, the Midtown brand grows stronger. On the right is Cinema Detroit, a small movie house that screens independent films. Farther along is the Bottom Line, a coffee shop popular with students, and then the Third Street Bar, another student hangout known for its artisanal pies.

For Roxborough, the value of Slow Roll is that it introduces a wide variety of people to areas they might otherwise avoid, dispelling some of the gloomier myths that surround the city's neighborhoods.

“It's wonderful to see this. It's really wonderful,” she says, waving at a little girl on a blue bike with a wicker basket. “Maybe they'll decide to come back.”



