

Essential Workers Dr. Michael Sernyak and Elias Estabrook Interviewed for National Bike to Work Week

In celebration of the League of American Bicyclists' National Bike to Work Week, NHCAT'S Sam Haiken caught up with two New Haven community members who ride their bikes to work: Dr. Michael Sernyak, CEO of the [Connecticut Mental Health Center](#) and professor and deputy chair for clinical affairs and program development at the Yale School of Medicine, and Elias Estabrook, staff and program manager at [New Haven Works](#). We wanted to know why Dr. Sernyak and Mr. Estabrook ride their bikes to work and what they think we can do to increase bike ridership and improve bike safety in New Haven and in our surrounding communities.

Both men report that biking to work has led to noticeable health benefits - both physical and mental. Dr. Sernyak, who frequently competed in bike races pre-pandemic, attributes his good fitness to his daily bike commute, which ranges from a 50-minute "short route" to a 2-hour "long route" from his home in Branford. He began biking to work around seven years ago. "It clears my head," he says, and sometimes leads to sudden bursts of inspiration: "It's just this flow state kind of thing where you're just rolling along, and every once in a while you have this idea, and you're like, *Oh my God, that's fantastic!*" He says that each day he bikes to work, he arrives at the hospital with a smile on his face.

Mr. Estabrook says that biking to work keeps him moving every day, wakes up his body and brain in the morning, and helps him feel alert. He first began biking to work during a summer he spent living and working in New Orleans, when he wanted a way to get around town without having to rely on a car or a bus and rail system that did not feel comprehensive. "It was an empowering experience to be on the bike, to close what felt like long distances and be able to reach places for work and recreation," he says, recounting that using a bike in New Orleans encouraged him to visit lots of different neighborhoods and eventually "inspired" him to begin biking more frequently when he returned to Connecticut to continue his schooling. He says he had "neglected" his bike before, but began biking to work regularly in 2015, and began "experimenting" with being a four-season cyclist in 2016.

Dr. Sernyak and Mr. Estabrook are both drivers as well; when we asked them how cycling has impacted the way they approach sharing the road with cyclists, they shared their own best practices for ensuring the safety of cyclists when they drive. They emphasized the importance of giving cyclists plenty of space on the side as well as when they are in front of or behind a cyclist. Dr. Sernyak urges drivers to be as polite to cyclists as possible, and also pointed out that when more cyclists are on the road, drivers become more accustomed to their presence. He is thrilled about what he describes as a pandemic-era "explosion" of bikes on 146, part of his route to work.

For drivers who are not cyclists, Mr. Estabrook says it's important to understand that cyclists vary in their level of knowledge of the rules of the road and the most appropriate ways to ride on the street. He urges drivers to be patient, exercise caution, and keep perspective. "Even if you

think you may be in a hurry, it's not worth crowding bicyclists off the road or being aggressive toward them," he says.

Dr. Sernyak has experienced his fair share of aggression from drivers; after years of racing and biking to work, he says, it doesn't bother him much anymore. But he has a request for drivers who aren't cyclists: "Accept the legitimacy of cyclists being on the road...you know that people who are riding are really terrified of you? It's not like they're being idiots, it's not like they're trying to impose their will - they're really afraid of you. Is that the way you like it?" He wants drivers to imagine that their kids are biking beside them on the road and says that the recommended three feet of distance between bikes and cars should be considered a minimum. He says one of the biggest barriers preventing more people from cycling is the fear of riding alongside cars.

Having facilities and infrastructure to make biking to work - and everywhere - more accessible is of prime importance to our interview subjects. When we asked Mr. Estabrook about the biggest challenge of biking to work, he said, "Getting sweaty!" It's important, he said, to be able to have a system and a routine when it comes to dealing with changing into and out of office clothes and being able to leave clothes safely at the office. Similarly, Dr. Sernyak stresses the importance of his shower and locker in the basement of the hospital.

Just as important is the existence of safe bike paths and trails that people can use to travel between their homes and their workplaces, as well as for recreation. Dr. Sernyak thinks New Haven is an example of a city that has the potential to expand its bike infrastructure in meaningful ways. He imagines a "superhighway" just for cyclists that stretches from Orange Street to the medical center: "You would get high adoption that way," he says, explaining, "it almost takes an act of aggression to assert your right to the road, and you gotta decrease that - you gotta make riding a bike really easy." He and Mr. Estabrook both cite the Farmington Canal Trail as an example of a resource that could be expanded to great effect. Dr. Sernyak imagines protected bike lanes branching off from the trail to deliver cyclists to various locations around New Haven. And Mr. Estabrook says that the trail, and others like it, could be utilized to help people transition from cycling recreationally to cycling as their primary mode of transportation by helping them become more comfortable on their bikes and by providing resources, like public bike maintenance stations and education, to make cycling more accessible to everyone.

When I asked Mr. Estabrook and Dr. Sernyak what they really want people to know about cycling, Mr. Estabrook stressed the importance of wearing a helmet. He didn't wear one as a teenager when he went on short, casual rides, but when his mother got into an accident with a car while she was riding her bike, the helmet she was wearing likely saved her life. That event convinced Mr. Estabrook to "get over the helmet hair" and find a helmet that felt good on his head. "Helmet-wearing can seem like a minor thing, but it's not," he said.

Dr. Sernyak said that he and men like him are sometimes known as MAMILs - middle-aged men in lycra - and that he tends to ride with people who also fit into that category. But, he says, he knows there is an "impressive coalition" of all bike-riders whose power hasn't been unleashed

yet. He says people who race on their bikes don't always organize with people who use them for commuting, even though "we all like bikes." He stands in solidarity with the efforts of Critical Mass events and other bike advocacy programs and looks forward to the day that the "primacy" of cars is knocked out. He says New Haven is in a position to "undo car supremacy." Here at NHCAT, we feel the same.

Many thanks to Mr. Elias Estabrook and Dr. Michael Sernyak for sharing their stories with NHCAT and riding their bikes to work!

Dr. Michael Sernyak

How long have you been riding your bike to work & why?

- On and off 7 years
- 3fold reasons:
 - Exercise - races bike, "it's a way of piling on miles without trying too hard"
 - Lives close enough between work and home - "This idea of being yet another car with a single driver going over the Q bridge just doesn't feel right when you're stuck in traffic."
 - Most important one: "It clears my head." puts a smile on his face when he gets into work; it's *his* time
 - Bikes when there's enough daylight
 - "It's just this flow state kind of thing where you're just rolling along, and every once in a while you have this idea, and you're like, *Oh my God, that's fantastic!*"
 - Short route is 50 mins, long route is 2 hours
 - Got a shower and locker room in the basement at the hospital
 - Almost always solitary, usually listens to a podcast or books as he rides

Have you been riding your bike more/less during pandemic?

- Much more
- 250-300 mile weeks! Remarkably good weather since pandemic started
- There hasn't been any racing since march
- Has been at the hospital every day - not working from home

Favorite thing about biking to work/in general?

- "It just feels great!"
- In good shape - best shape of his life
- Has become totally second-nature to him - misses riding any day he doesn't get to do it; has become part of the rhythm of his day; it's a nice bookend between work day and home

Has it changed the way you drive w/ cyclists on road?

- When he rides, just assumes people are going to do the stupidest thing possible; has adopted the same philosophy when he drives
- "I'm never going to win an argument with a car" - "Not to get all Buddhist, but who cares? It only counts if I care about it"
- Gives cyclists "tremendous berth" when he is driving
- Stays behind cyclists for a while when he drives, stays in a far lane, doesn't overtake them in an awkward position or if they will both be turning at the same time
- "The politer you are to people on bikes, the better"
- When more people ride bikes, it helps dr sernyak with everyone getting more used to cyclists on the road
- Has been an "explosion" of cyclists on 146, which he loves

What would you say to drivers who don't cycle?

- "Accept the legitimacy of cyclists being on the road!"
- Before you yell something at a cyclist, think: would you yell that at someone else, someone in a car?
- "Do you agree that cyclists have just as much of a right to be on the road as you do?"
- 3 feet is a minimum - if your kid was on the side of the road, how much distance would you want between the side of your car and the kid?
- Invites people who drive to get out on the road on their bike and give it a try
- Biggest barrier to more people cycling is that "they just don't want to mix it up with cars" - "it can be pretty terrifying" - to drivers: "You know that people who are riding are really terrified of you? It's not like they're being idiots, it's not like they're trying to impose their will - they're really afraid of you. Is that the way you like it?"

Best way to encourage more people to bike to work/errands/for fun?

- Have facilities at work so when you get there - showering, lockers, ability to put your bike away - it's pretty seamless
- Tyranny of cars - thinks there should be a superhighway from Orange Street to the medical center just for bikes - you would get high adoption that way - "it almost takes an act of aggression to assert your right to the road, and you gotta decrease that - you gotta make riding a bike really easy"
- post-WWII, there was a big car boom in the US - car became huge part of our lives - "You have to knock that out of its primacy"
- Impressed that young people aren't in a huge hurry to get licenses or own a car
- Great work being done in NYC, DC, Chicago w/ bike share programs
- Urban design that rejects cars/parking - undoes the primacy of those things
- "I think New Haven could [undo car supremacy here]!" You could dedicate a lane for cyclists on roads
- Protected infrastructure - at least initially

Most challenging part of biking to work?

- The last 200 yards - cross over frontage sts on park; "the road stinks, you're cutting across things that are almost highways"
- In new haven, extraordinary opportunity of canal trail coming from the north - can imagine protected bike lanes coming off of that to get you wherever you need to go in new haven - we aren't taking advantage of that

What has your own community done, and what would you like to see?

- Great job of extending shoreline trail
- "What would be great would be the shoreline towns taking a regional commuting solution to New Haven" - a trail dumping into branford, guilford, madison
- There are signs on 146 indicating cyclists can use the road, and that's "nice," but there isn't a lot of room on the road
- Branford could do more to make town center accessible to people riding their bikes into town center - shops, restaurants, town green

- Lots of young people in new haven who would be happy to ride their bikes around

Anything else you'd like to add?

- Identifies as MAMIL - middle-aged male in lycra - aware that the people he rides with look like him - stands in solidarity w/ fixed gear people, critical mass - all trying to do the same thing - use the road for bikes - impressive coalition - the power of it hasn't been unleashed yet - people who race doesn't really talk to people who commute, even though they all like bikes

Elias Estabrook

How long have you been biking to work & why?

- First experience regularly biking to work: 2013; lived and worked in NOLA for a summer; getting a bike seemed like a great option for getting around; worked for a farmers' market organization kind of like city seed; also took the bus, but there wasn't a comprehensive bike and rail system there; got to see a lot of different neighborhoods
- "It was an empowering experience to be on the bike, to close what felt like long distances and be able to reach places for work and recreation - local businesses, bookstores."
- The experience "inspired" him when he came back as a full-time student in CT and started biking to class a lot more (as well as walking)
- Had neglected bike before, had thought of it just as a "vehicle for enjoyment" - got used to being on the bike every day
- Started biking to work in 2015; by 2016, was experimenting with being a 4-season biker (except when there was snow on the ground); moved to an apt that was within 1-2 miles of his workplace, a reasonable distance to bike
- Affordability is a factor - purchase price, insurance
- Sometimes drives a car - has a license - but likes the convenience of biking
- Has physical and mental health impacts that feel very positive - moving every day, wakes up his body and brain in the morning, helps him feel alert

Since pandemic - more or less riding, or the same?

- Riding less - working from home - has started riding more for errands and recreationally - longer distances on trail, or taking streets to new haven suburbs that he hasn't explored before; pandemic has changed his daily bike routine
- Occasionally still goes to work in downtown new haven and bikes there

Has biking to work shifted driving habits around cyclists?

- Yes, definitely! When making turns, very careful not to cut bikers off; mindful of distance of a bike that is approaching from behind when at an intersection; giving space to people
- "In my head, I'm cheering people on when they're biking"

What would you say to drivers who are non-cyclists?

- Bikers are at many different levels in terms of knowledge of the rules of the road, appropriate ways to ride on the street - patience is important! Be more cautious - keep perspective - even if you think you may be in a hurry, not worth crowding bicyclists out of the road or being aggressive toward them

How to encourage others to bike to work, run errands, for fun, etc?

- Having great bike facilities, especially “off-road dedicated lanes” or trails like the canal trail - those are an entryway into really enjoying biking and becoming more confident on your bike to the point where you may take that leap to also biking on the street on a regular basis
- A lot of people of all backgrounds use bikes in new haven - bike education can help, even in brief formats
- Provide affordable equipment and ways to maintain bikes - if your bike is in bad shape, you probably won't take it out on the road - not first choice when planning a trip

Most challenging aspect of biking to work?

- Getting sweaty - figuring out a system or routine for yourself - what to wear? What to leave at the office?
- Exposure to the elements - it takes investment into the right equipment to be able to ride when it's cold or keep your clothes/bike/bag dry
- Bike parking is not so much of an issue - plus we're doing a lot better at that recently, not so much of a barrier anymore

What could be done in new haven to make it easier for people to bike to work?

- Part of NHW's mission is to support new haven community members in finding local jobs that are near where they live, which helps encourage people to bike as part of their commute
- Safe pathways for bikers to get to areas that are hubs for workplaces - not just downtown, but other parts of the city too

Anything else you would like to say?

- As a teenager, didn't wear a helmet for short rides; mom got into an accident with a car on a small, local street and was hurt pretty bad - fortunately she had a helmet on - she fell forward onto her head, helmet really made a difference - that event convinced him to suck up the helmet hair, find a helmet that felt good on his head, because he accepted he would wear one to be as safe as possible in addition to just riding in a predictable way so that his interaction with cars was safe - helmet-wearing can seem like a minor thing, but it's not