



channel mastery

Channel Mastery Podcast, #123: Aimee Ross, Director of Bike Bentonville

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Kristin: Welcome back everybody to another episode of the Channel Mastery podcast. I am absolutely delighted today to introduce Aimee Ross, the Director of Bike Bentonville to you. Welcome to the show, Aimee.

Aimee: Thanks Kristin. Happy to be here.

Kristi: It's so great to have you here. We quite a storied history together going back to Tony Ellsworth. That is a page from both of our pasts. Great guy. Awesome experience for both of us, but that's how long we've known each other. It's been awhile.

Aimee: I actually counted up as 14 years-ish now.

Kristin: That's crazy. My daughter was probably a baby when we were working on that because she's 14 now.

Aimee: Probably. Some of that is starting to come back.

Kristin: That's crazy. Well, it's wonderful to have you here and I just feel like I won the lottery having you here because what you're leading up Bike Bentonville is extraordinary and it is so exciting as a passionate cyclist myself and leading a company that works with a lot of cycling brands, but also works beyond cycling and we really have just a heartfelt commitment to getting more people outdoors and more people on bikes, not just the really cool people with the right height socks. What you're doing is just incredible and I literally feel like you're going to bring so much value to the Channel Mastery on audience day, talking about your experience with Bike Bentonville. Before we go to that, let's talk about your background, kind of who you are and your career experience and how you got to Bentonville.

Aimee: Yeah. As we kind of touched on, Ellsworth was my first job in the cycling space, pretty much right out of college, maybe a few months after. I dove right into working on the manufacturing side, doing sales and marketing. Spent three ish years there, had a short little stint with Zoic and helped them for a short time and then ended up with Crankbrothers for a while up in Laguna Beach and spent another three ish years there. Had some great opportunities working with that company, again, all from a manufacturing standpoint and all pretty much mountain biking related. I'm fortunate enough to meet my husband through that process. He was a Colorado native and he

wanted to go back there, so we moved to Colorado and I ended up working for IMBA, the International Mountain Bicycling Association. That move for me was really strategic and the fact that I had spent a lot of time working on the manufacturing side and really loved it, but I always kind of felt like there was something out there that... There's something else. There's more to this.

Jumping in with IMBA, I stayed there for a little over five years. IMBA led me to Bentonville, introduced me into this community in 2015 and then I was part of the team that helped host the IMBA world summit down here. Shortly after that, a few short years after that, my boss here, Kayleen, would visit Bentonville, had reached out and recruited me to take this position in helping sell Bentonville as a tourism destination, in particular for cyclists. For me it was kind of a really good next step because what I love about mountain biking and cycling in general is the places that you get to go and what that does to connect people to the outdoors. I feel like I've kind of found my niche and this whole community is connecting the bike and the people to the places.

Kristin: Oh, I can't wait to dig more into this. I mean, first of all, we have to talk about how this role came to be and I believe just in doing research and being part of the bicycle community, the cycling community at large, there's all kinds of opinions. I feel like people have such strong opinions about Bentonville. It's not a polarizing opinion at all. I don't think there's any animosity, but there's a lot of speculation. They're just like, well, what's going on there and how has it grown so fast? Of course they kind of go into, as we all do, when they don't have information, they make up their own. They're deciding, well, it must be Walmart money or it must be this and I would love to just have you talk about how the position was developed, what the foundation was that you came in on and where you're going with this and really give us the true story, please.

Aimee: Yeah. It's like it's a great story and I'm happy that I get to be a part of it now. Bike Bentonville was a nonprofit that was created back in 2009. It's shifted a little bit between different parts of the city and now into the tourism aspect where visit Bentonville has completely absorbed the brand and uses that to promote our story of cycling here in our community. To kind of go back to where a lot of this started was about 2006, there was some trail development that was going on, some local advocates and mountain bikers that were out digging in the woods just north of town. A couple of those happened to be heirs to Walmart and the Walton money. It's great to know that they're just like the rest of us, advocating for trails and what they loved and from there it's continued to grow. I think those first few years were slow development, like you see in many communities, putting the trails there, showing that people are using them, going and advocating for a little bit more, how that continues to build out and they really worked within the community, those advocates, to build more advocates and Kayleen and our office here was one of them. They went and really talked to her about what they were trying to do and what they wanted to create as a vision for this community, is providing opportunities for people that were living here to have an active, healthy lifestyle, but with the forthright to think that it could be a destination at some point in the future.

When you think about the process of that from 2006 to today, I think everyone around here really agrees that around 2016 when the IMBA world summit came here really put

us on the map. It allowed Visit Bentonville to bring in some media partners to really share the story of what was happening here and the world was really introduced to Bentonville. More trail development was happening and yeah, a lot of that comes with traditional and nontraditional partnerships, more collaboration. I think those first few years of seeing what was possible started to get more buy in from different community partners that this was a viable economic driver for this community and something that they did want to continue to advocate for, keep as a place in our city and beyond and that's where we are now today.

Kristin: There's a lot in there that I think the Channel Mastery community can benefit from understanding and that is how you got the story out. Obviously we talk about the bobbing and weaving and continual optimization and change that happens and how we do that, but the story that you shared obviously isn't going to change. That's the founder story. I'm wondering if there might've been, a few things that happened when you came in that were almost like... You have a great background in multiple facets of cycling, but obviously in marketing and communications. I'm sure you came in and were like, wait, you're not telling this story here? We need to do this here. What were some of the low hanging fruit moments where you were just like, I'm going to tweak this arrow and push it in this direction and probably saw a lot of traction come from that?

Aimee: I think it's thinking about... Consciously and purposefully thinking about how we're posting out on social media and what some of that is and actually looking at it from a holistic approach and going, okay, the last couple of days maybe we've shared the same type of looking writers on our social media, let's make sure we're really getting a little bit more diverse on that and so we're more purposeful in that aspect. I think the whole team here has really gotten behind it and social media, video, newsletter, even upping the content in our newsletter and sharing some stories in there of some of the people here or telling the story of a trail. Maybe a trail got a face lift. How are we talking about that? How are we sharing that story?

Yeah, I think, like you said, it's ever changing and so you have to constantly keep up with that, sharing the story with the media. Bringing in travel writers and social influencers has helped us a lot. Allowing them to come and spend time in our community and showing them the trails, introducing them to the culinary aspects that we have, the arts and culture that's continuing to bloom and develop. It really allowed us to share the entire experience, not just the cycling component of it, but that Bentonville is really a destination and a place to come for cyclists and then beyond that and allowing people to tap into it.

Kristin: Yeah, it's incredible. I have the great fortune of having been able to be there for the media weekend that we did around Big Sugar's launch. I fell in love with the community and I mean... It's an absolutely adorable picturesque small town. There's a couple things I just want to share with the audience and of course we'll put links to everything that we can in the show notes, but the town itself is just... It almost looks like a Disney set, but it's real. It's absolutely adorable and so shoppable and you literally want to go explore the square. Tell us about the coffee shop there because that's kind of a big, big draw. I've bought a couple pieces of schwag from there that I'm quite proud of actually.

Aimee: The coffee scene just continues to grow here as well. Our downtown square is a really unique place and it is very picturesque. We do get people that say it's very Disneyland or Mayberry and I think one of the things that I really, really love and appreciate about our downtown square and our community are a couple of things. One, when you go other places, it really does make you feel appreciative when you come home to see what we have. The time, the care, the collaboration, the community development that's really gone into this. Then two, that you can access trails right from that square. That's pretty amazing in itself, but then the different aspects of the restaurants and the culture that are in and around that. The coffee shops where you have this New York style feeling coffee lab, right in the heart of downtown and they're welcoming to everyone, including cyclists. You could walk over there at any point during the day and you see mountain bikers hanging out, out front, drinking a coffee after they've either come back from a ride or they're ready to go. It's allowed places like that and those restaurant experiences to create even more and kind of push the bar a little bit. We're... The biggest small city is what a lot of people will say. We have a lot of great big city amenities in a very small, quaint, very tight knit community.

Kristin: It does really feel like it was very intentional the way that it was designed. I'm assuming that the same force that had the vision behind creating the world-class trail system and probably whatever goes into creating road biking and commuting safety and then also obviously the gravel, right? That's been a fabulous addition and I know we can get to the cyclo-cross component here in a minute, but that same brain trust, if you will, I think also is putting this community together. I see a lot of art. I see culture. I see just great restaurants as you say and just a very walkable great tight knit community. Is that also Walmart vision, like the heirs of the Walmart vision there?

Aimee: I think the Walton family foundation being here and having their headquarters, their home office for both Walmart and the family foundation here, they're all great partners in this. The city plays a huge role in it. Visit Bentonville, our chamber, our parks and rec department, I mean I could go on and on, the list of partners that come to the table and have these discussions about what the future looks like and what this community can continue to benefit from and how does that fit in and continue to develop off of what we have. Yeah, those visions I would say are not stand alone there. Someone may come to the table with like, hey, I have this great idea and then next thing you know there's all these other people sitting at the table and they're feeding off of that and it grows into something very natural for our community and little bit, maybe more purposeful thought through and you end up with some of these really great results where you have a place that feels safe and comfortable and fun and different and...

Kristin: Affordable?

Aimee: Yeah, yeah.

Kristin: It is very affordable everybody.

Aimee: It is. Yeah. You can't forget that part.

Kristin: I have a quick question and it does kind of tie into like the economic impact. As you

mentioned, 2006 this vision was kicked off, people were building trails, et cetera. Has that given you and your team enough time to have numbers to share and is that driving decision making?

Aimee: For sure. One of the things that happened in 2017 a study was conducted in partnership between the Walton Family Foundation and PeopleForBikes. Their charter was to measure the impact specifically around cycling and they did that and their reports came out and there were some really, really great information that came out where they found that \$27 million were directly impacted from tourism.

Kristin: That is fantastic.

Aimee: Yeah. The numbers go on. The overall impact was 137 million, that also includes health and wellness benefits. That study that happened really kind of was a bigger package. A lot of folks here, especially our office is always interested in the data and the numbers and trying to understand where people are coming from and what are the things that they're most attracted to, but being able to take that benchmark and now know where to measure from, moving forward in the future as we continue to plan and so, yes, those numbers are looked after. They have helped create what's going to be planned next and we continue to look for other opportunities in which we can find better data to share.

Kristin: So Aimee, I have a quick question that kind of, I think, continues on the economic topic, but not really. In a way it does because of just the diversification of cyclists that I think you're attracting. But Bentonville located in a really special place regionally, and as a person who's worked in the outdoor active lifestyle markets for decades now it's always the Southeast that seems to be like a puzzle piece you can't solve in terms of distribution or sales channels. It's almost like Southern Europe.

And the reason I say that is it's just when you look at like the regions that people kind of quarter out as they're looking at sales territories, for example, that's always one that's a little bit of a quandary. And what I've seen Bike Bentonville do that's I think remarkable is you've almost played to that strength. And I think that people in that region or even on the East coast have a very direct line to experience their identity as cyclists in Bentonville, and they want to raise their hand and be part of that community. Can you talk about some of the intentional things that you've done through your marketing, through channels, or through storytelling that have purposefully like widened the portal to invite more people in from different regions, and different economic backgrounds, and maybe even different nationalities?

Aimee: Yeah, that's a really good question. So I mean, I'll start here locally. What the trails were originally developed for, the people living in this community, for the residents. And a lot of that was because we are the home of Walmart, and Walmart was bringing in employees from, quite frankly, all over the world. And so giving those employees an opportunity to participate in that active healthy lifestyle, and making that a little bit more accessible instead of letting them wonder, "How do I get to these things," or, "Where do I find that stuff within the community, or within the region, or the state." And so, I think the trails got put there in starting to talk to them, starting to talk to the Walmart associates about what's here and what's available to them, making the bike

pass go right directly to their office. That's a pretty surefire way to like reach out and grab them directly.

And then from there as we really started thinking about like the vision overall, and moving forward, and how you're really attracting tourists, it was just starting small and reaching out. What's that five hour drive time to get people here? And reaching into those markets and using a lot of traditional channels, magazine ads, or opportunities to host travel writers from those communities that are maybe smaller publications that you don't see at a national level, but are really good information sources for the people that are in those communities. That's been super successful. Going out and talking to those communities, in particular, if they're hosting events or summits and asking for the opportunity to tell our story and share what we have going on here. And then, growing upon that, I will say, one part of the story that I love is Kalene, our president, and David Wright, who is the parks and rec director here in Bentonville, would tag team and they would go to some of these conferences around the country, and talk about the Bentonville story, and how the trails are connected to the square, and the downtown, and the restaurants. And it was before it looked like it does today and so it was a lot less that we had available to us, but they were so driven and passionate, and believed in where we were going, and what we have that the story was powerful and people came and they loved it. And they came again, and they continue to love it. And every time they come now there's more.

And so, I think every year we sit down and look at what's kind of like that next area that we want to reach to. There's definitely things that we've worked with the team of a little bit more strategic, like working with partners like Mountain Flyer. We know they're traditionally a Western magazine, how do we get them to help tell our story here of what's happening? Because it is different than what's happened in the West. Promoting ourselves as being part of the Heartland. I mean, we are right in the middle of the US pretty much, and so easily able to get to from a much broader population, or larger population base.

Kristin: One of the best airports ever, by the way.

Aimee: Yeah. Again, one of those things that you appreciate when you come home from other places and you're like, "I like that this is easy to get through and ..."

Kristin: It is easy to initiate. And so I guess one of the things I saw, and I think it was close to the time that we did the big sugar activation there, was your story. I know you were part of it, the women's mountain biking. I don't know if it's a club or a group, but I saw some fantastic coverage, and some very aspirational photos that included what I thought was a wide range of female writers. Can you talk about that a little bit? And then, we'll go into almost like an air war and a ground war in terms of what you're doing with the tourism outreach, as well as what the global cycling community is doing already for you. So I want to talk about that too.

Aimee: Okay. Yeah. So the women's movement, Women of Oz is the name of the group, and they launched themselves last year. In fact, March was their first ride. I was fortunate enough to be a part of that movement that happened. And I would say, I think the

women's cycling piece was here. There was a group that was doing it. And then, another group came in and these ladies were doing it. And then you saw another group come in and so there was a few different groups all riding but not necessarily riding together.

And there was a moment in time that someone asked the question like how do we bring this all together? And so a bunch of us got in a room, I think it was about 30 women, and it was interesting for me to be in that room being, at that point, still fairly new to actually residing in the community, but they kept referencing back an event that I helped bring here when I was still with IMBA was the IMBA Women's Uprising that we held in Bentonville the Spring of 2018. And to hear some of these women in the room that attended that event and talked about how inspired they were to get out there and ride more, to be a place maker on the community, to start advocating more, and really understand a little bit of what it takes from the backend as opposed to just riding.

And so from that, seeing this momentum that these women wanted to gather behind and say, "Okay, we're going to do this and we're going to get really organized. And we're going to be a little bit more purposeful about this, and commit to something that everyone felt like they could commit to," they didn't overextend themselves. It's every first Saturday of the month they host a ride. They bring together women of all varieties. They open up skills clinics, so if you have never been on a mountain bike ever you have the opportunity to learn some techniques and skills before you end up going out on, what a lot of them perceive to be, the super scary trails that we have here. And they also look for opportunities to help find them tools to get there. Like if they don't have a bike, we tapped into the bike shops, and the parks and rec department, and different entities to just help provide that so that the barrier isn't there. And they're continuing to move forward and integrate into the community, and really try to make their way. So this first year is about being really consistent, getting more women out there. And then, really trying to establish themselves as one of those collaborators in the community around the cycling space.

Kristin: Well, as an outsider, seeing the media on that it really showed me right away that there's a commitment from the community to grow women's participation. And just so you know, when you're always on the inside it feels like we're committing to what we can, and I mean it looks like an incredible movement. And when you say 30 people showed up to plan it in this one community that's incredible.

So I just also want to point that out to the audience. You're doing a great job, I think if she can see it, she can be it. You're depicting that, I think, with your marketing collateral. And that goes the same for people of color, and different age groups and families, and somebody wearing a full face helmet versus I half shell helmet. I just feel like you guys are doing a great job enabling people to see themselves in your marketing, and that's something that everybody listening today, I think, could take a page out of your playbook for.

Aimee: And I would say with that it's not necessarily that it's a marketing strategy that we're like, "Hey we got to make sure we have women. Or we have to make sure we have the kids and people in full face or half shells." That's what's happening here in the community. We know that the best way to share Bentonville, and to market Bentonville

is by bringing people here. And once they see it then they know and understand because it really is that authentic across the board. Me and my husband when he moved here from Colorado, and he was like, "Why are all these people riding around cross-country trails in full face helmets? Because, to your point, being in the industry for so long that's what he knew. And I'm like, "Hey, if that's what's making them feel comfortable to get out there and do it, more power to them. And it took him a little bit to get used to it, but he's like, "You're right. It is really cool to see a lot more different types of people engaging in mountain biking."

Kristin: Oh I bet, it's very heartening for him. This whole life seems to have been. Just so people know, Nat Ross is not only the co-director of the Big Sugar Gravel event, but he's a hall of fame mountain biker. So, I just had to put that plug in because I know you're both very humble. So, going back to kind of like channel and marketing, and sales, and all the stuff that I know a lot of my beloved nerds with channel mastery we all love to ask. I would be remiss not to ask. You sound like you're, you brought this very diverse background that has product, that has sales, it has marketing and nonprofits. And I'm curious to know, it sounds like the job that you're in is much, much more than marketing. It's, basically, you're rolling up to the tourism office. Does that mean it's a government job? What is like the structure that you're in? And let's talk about what success looks like for you in this role.

Aimee: Yeah, so we're an interesting entity. We were created by the city. What we like to call ourselves as quasi government. We're not nonprofit, but we are not managed by the city. We do have a board of commissioners that sit in roles of hospitality. And then, we also have a couple that are city commissioners as well. So that streamline of collaboration is always continuing to go back and forth between the city and us. A lot of tourism bureaus are also part of their Chamber of Commerce. We also have a Chamber of Commerce and they are separate. So it really does allow our office to focus on the tourism aspect, bringing people into this community and showing them everything that Bentonville has to offer.

And so for me, in particular, in this role I do get to focus on cycling. And you're right, it does go beyond. It's more than marketing and communications. It's also trying to sell this community and convince people to come here. And then, in continuing to look for other opportunities to broaden what we have. And also being a part of the community and a collaborator in that as well. And being able to share some of those thoughts and experiences both from my former life, and then what I've learned in being here, and as a community member now, and a resident, someone that wants something, knowing that people these days want to travel to places where people want to live. So they can be kind of one in the same, a little bit there.

Kristin: And it sounds to me, as you said, it's a special ... the office itself sounds like it may not be necessarily replicable in other communities. But what I'm trying to get across is probably, if there's a will, there's a way. And if we're talking about over 120 million in revenue that's tied back to cycling think about the other gateway communities, if you will. I'm thinking of Ashley Cornblatt at Outerbike with the work that she does. And I'm thinking about, why wouldn't we have people who are advocating for cycling as part of a larger tourism opportunity? It's definitely turning return for you. So I just want to make

sure I get that on the record in this. Even if you don't have the same runway that Bentonville does, there may be where there's a will there's a way.

Aimee: And I think one of the things that we're hoping with this is to be ... I would never say that we're looking to be the leader in this, but we would love for people to be able to learn from us. And we offer those opportunities as some of the things that we do like in Trail Labs and sharing that message that you don't necessarily have to be Bentonville, or do it like Bentonville, but when there is a community that supports it, wants to really see that happen, you get buy in from a lot of different entities that support that cycling measure anything's possible.

Kristin: And bikes make you feel like anything's possible too, for that matter. I'm just going to throw that out there. So let's take a little look at the cottage industry that's growing up around Bentonville in cycling, and if there are other facets to it, an outdoor active lifestyle we're all ears. But I understand that there's Allied and, obviously, Biathlon, sorry if I said that the wrong way, but can you talk a little bit about the hard goods companies that are popping up there? If there's anything we need to know from a retail standpoint, service standpoint, how is that growing with the tourism dollars and the focus on cycling?

Aimee: So I think with some of those brands one of the things that we know for sure from a tourism standpoint is by bringing people into this community and doing what we do by branding and promoting, and selling our destination it does lead to economic development. There's a direct line in that. And so when it comes down to it are we going out and looking for companies like Allied and saying, "Hey, please move your operations here." That's not what we do, but we know that is happening. And so that's where the Chamber of Commerce then steps in and they're like, "Okay, we're going to pick up that ball and run with it now."

There is a movement to try and bring more bike industry and, at some point, outdoor industry brands here. We wouldn't be the first community to do that and make that purpose draw to try and attract those types of businesses. I think the cycling aspect is really big because of the fact the assets that we have. With the Allied piece, being a component down in Little Rock, the move to Bentonville was was easier. And then, it also allows them, as a company and as a brand, to open up the door for a larger talent pool as well because we know that people are moving into Northwest Arkansas in pretty high numbers. I think they said it's like 34 people a day into the region.

Kristin: Wow.

Aimee: Yeah, it's a desirable area to live because the cost of living is so relatively low and you have a lot of great amenities. And so basing some of those brands here ... and I think brands like Allied, and RAFA now, and Biathlon are anchors for what we'll see coming in the future. I think there will be other brands that'll look to us as a place that they can call home.

Kristin: And it's really interesting. We look at this a lot for the work that we do with our clients,

especially Velofix right now we're looking at this a tremendous amount. But when you look at the competition between cities for talent, and a lot of it is, I think, the headlines point to tech more so, right? But this is something, I mean it is a very tight labor pool. And people are going to have more and more choice in terms of like the companies, and communities they want to live in. And I actually think that what you're putting on the map in terms of outdoor recreation in the form of cycling, but I know that your trails are probably used and there's rivers and lakes and everything all around you, you are in a Mecca, but that actually is a huge, huge draw.

And I spent four years on the Outdoor Recreation Board with Colorado. I mean, I know that you were involved in that with IMBA as well. And that was a huge part of what was drawing people was, let's build in a quality of life here. But you have a better airport, you don't have the traffic, and you have far better access, right? And there's probably a lot of other infrastructure things that you could tout as bonuses as well. But I just think it's just a matter of time. And you're right, seeing those big brands step up is ... and that the RAPHA move was very recent, right? That was in first quarter of 2020 that that was announced.

Aimee: Yeah.

Kristin: So I just guarantee there's going to be more. And that leads to my next question I think really, really seamlessly, and that is just the number of events that you have going on there. It's just incredible the proliferation of events and opportunity for people to come and experience this community. How much of that is organic, and how much of that is just people saying, "We have to be down there." I have clients who are literally asking, "Well we want to get involved in this event because we have to see what the heck's going on in Bentonville."

Aimee: Right, yeah. I think there's probably, at this point in time, there might be a little bit of both going on between both us pulling that stuff in, and then a little bit of that organic place now where people have come, and they're like, "I want to do my event there." But I give a lot of credit to the team at Visit Bentonville and some of those early on advocates. They started building out this trail system, and started learning more, and they got really involved with IMBA, and they were leaning on IMBA a lot for some of the development practices, and working with different entities and things like that, and then learned about the World Summit.

In 2014, they bid for the World Summit. They wanted the World Summit really bad. Unfortunately, they were turned down and they said, "Well just go away, come back, we're interested." They really put down a lot of effort and energy into creating a space that in 2016, when they applied for it again, they were awarded it. I think there was a lot of strong drive and energy going out there going like, "We know we can do this, just give us that opportunity." And they did, and it was amazing.

I mean they blew it out of the water. The town overall, I think the hospitality that you feel when you come here in general is that Southern hospitality, as they say, was something that really drew people in, and then the trails. The overall experience on top of that I think is just something that when people hear Bentonville, Arkansas, I think we

still have a little bit of that stigma that they think they know what they're going to get, and then they get here, and they're like, "Wow, that was not at all what I had imagined."

Kristin: That's exactly right.

Aimee: And from a positive place. From that standpoint, I think the IMBA World Summit in 2016 really was this launching pad that allowed the door to open for more conversations with partners like Epic Rides, like Outer Bike, to bring those events here. In 2018, both of those started their inaugural years here and are continuing. And then it's always been a constant like, well what else is there? What else can we do? And not just in the mountain biking space for cycling, but overall, from what do we have from road infrastructure and greenway, because there are some local events that are happening here that are really big and are done really well.

We have an event called Square 2 Square that happens twice a year, and it runs the length of the Razorback Greenway. In the spring it starts in Bentonville... Sorry, it starts in Fayetteville and ends in Bentonville, and in the fall it starts in Bentonville and ends in Fayetteville. It's a great collaboration between communities.

Kristin: That's cool.

Aimee: But then when I got here, and started kind of digging in and exploring a little bit more than the mountain bike trails, and my love for being on the dirt, and looking at the gravel piece and seeing that there were some established gravel events that were really more locally focused and driven. Sometimes they would get some people coming in depending on the time of year, and proximity to where they were, and training schedules, and stuff like that. I thought, "Is this area ripe?" And sitting down with the team here going, "Is this something that we should really look after?" And everyone's like, "Yeah, let's see what we can do."

Having the opportunity to reach out to one of the best run gravel event producers in the world, in my opinion, and say, "Hey, what do you guys think about Bentonville?" And bringing them in to experience it, and seeing if this was a fit for something that they wanted, and being able to put that on our list that we can really, with that partnership, showcase what else we have. Because I mean, Kristin, you probably saw it when you were here the amazing hollows that we have, and landscapes being part of the foothills of the Ozarks is just astonishing. Every time I go out and explore someplace new, I'm always blown away about what you can find out there.

Kristin: You literally feel like you're in a different country.

Aimee: Yeah.

Kristin: It's incredible, and it's not a walk in the park. I mean, there's definitely terrain for everybody, but I just want everybody to know you're talking about the Dirty Kanza Promoters I'm assuming.

Aimee: Yes.

Kristin: They have incredible vision, and they are world-class. Just like you, we come from cycling, product is king and queen, terrain and trails have been king and queen, this gravel is definitely top of the line, and it is something that I think you're just scratching the surface of. I can't even imagine how much more there is, but it is nothing short of pristine, beautiful wilderness that you literally can only see on a bike. And listening to Kristi Mohn talk about it gives you goosebumps. I mean, she literally was driving around in a pickup truck with you guys I think, and looking at everything. She tells that story and almost get teary. I mean it is literally a soulful place to ride.

Aimee: It is. And I think it's... again, you see a boom now in riders here that are like, "Okay, what's this gravel thing? We've got to do that. Can I take my mountain bike out?" And it's like, "Yes, bring your mountain bike, let's go."

Kristin: Right.

Aimee: You see these pop-up rides that are now happening on Sunday evenings that's an easy 10 to 15-ish mile gravel ride that's just really chill to help bring the community culture piece along with it, and help people understand what that component is, and why it's so special.

Kristin: Before I ask you what it looks like ahead, I would love to ask you what has been your proudest moment in your role?

Aimee: I think for me it's being able to come in and being a part of what is continuing to develop here. I think now is such a really cool time for Bentonville when it comes to the cycling movement. Being a part of that community, integrating with a lot of the players that have been around for years, and some of the new ones that are coming to the table, and how different ideas and visions are bubbling up to the surface and where that will go. And knowing that some of those visions we're going to see in a shorter amount of time than some other places might generally go after. I will say that things in Bentonville move pretty fast, and that's because we have a community that supports it.

And then being able to be a resident and a local as part of the culture, from a personal standpoint as well as, you know, there's just no shortage of people that you can call up on any given day and say, "Hey, are you riding this afternoon? Let's go." Or engaging with new riders, showing them that feel, and helping teach them has been some of the awesome parts, and then introducing other people to this community. There's nothing more that I love than someone new coming down here, and being able to show them some of the trails, and then everything that we have that's off the trail too.

Kristin: Right, and the mind blown emoji.

Aimee: Yeah. It's pretty special.

Kristin: It is, it is, and your timing was just spot on. I also just have to say the timing was great of course, but your leadership has really driven this, and I love that you are on a team with people who are in tourism, and chamber, and a community that backs it. I mean, there

are so many areas I think across the country that have potentially beautiful terrain as well, but they have maybe a little bit of an opposition within the community that doesn't like new people, or new this, or that.

I just also hold Bentonville up as like look what can happen when you are open minded. Look what can happen when you do put out the recreation first to help grow an economy, or in tandem with another major industry or major company. It just has been so additive, and added so much character, and I think that that's something that's important for us to take away here as well. I just have to ask, I don't want to pigeonhole future with cyclo-cross at all, so I'm going to ask a quick question on the cyclo-cross win that you had recently, and then we'll go into how do you see maybe the near term future shaping up for Bike Bentonville. Tell us about the cyclo-cross grab.

Aimee: The cyclo-cross event is actually going to take place in Fayetteville, so the 2022 World Championships was announced, and that will take place at park that they're developing out called Centennial Park down in Fayetteville. As a region, we're super supportive. We know that we're stronger together, and so when it comes to big events like that, like the world is coming to Northwest Arkansas.

Kristin: It's pretty cool.

Aimee: Yeah, and it's like, okay, everyone's got to get prepared. So not only is it, I mean, yes, while the center of the cyclo-cross piece is going to be in Fayetteville, we know that Bentonville is going to have some support, and help, and a piece of that just as well as Rogers, and Springdale, and some of the other communities along the the corridor. We're supportive of what they want to do. In fact, Experience Fayetteville, the tourism agency down there, hired a cycling coordinator as of recent. So he and I actually spend, again another unique position, we spend time every month just getting together and connecting on things that he's working on and that I'm working on, and how are we working together to make things stronger.

Not only is it happening in the city of Bentonville that overall collaboration and community buy-in, but it's happening across the region as well. I think that's really unique in that space because without it, would we be able to have some of that stuff? I don't know. I mean, it might be a little bit tough, but I think just knowing that you have the support from your neighbors-

Kristin: Yep.

Aimee: ... and that buy-in really does, I mean when that happens, we do applaud and clap for everyone. I mean, when The Big Sugar was announced here in Bentonville, he called me up and he said, "Hey, congratulations, that's a really great win." It's vice versa.

Kristin: That's awesome. Tell us about the future. I mean, I know you can't open the kimono completely, but can you share a little bit of what's exciting for you on the near term horizon?

Aimee: I think for us is continuing to find the spaces to introduce more people to the sport, and

how we play a role in that being at the table when we're talking about what else do we need here in our community to continue to draw more cycling types, more different types of people that are riding all those different cycling types. Making sure that we do have something for everyone when it comes to cycling, and then how we're integrating them into our community, and the arts and culture scene, and all the different special events that we have in that space. I mean, that's one thing that we all kind of laugh about is there's something to do here all the time, and when you go to those places you always tend to run in to someone that you know, and I'm not talking about just cycling-related events.

But yeah, I mean we're always open minded. We're always looking for maybe what's next, and what continues to grow, and how we can expand, and continue to share community with more. I know the event piece for us is something that we'll always continue to look at as a driver for both our economy, but also giving people a reason to come. Like you said, you have a lot of clients that are like, "That event is on our list because we need to go and check it out, and see what's going on down there." It's finding opportunities to give people that reason, and maybe what else we're missing.

And I look at it in particular from a cycling standpoint, so yeah.

Kristin: Well they're so lucky to have you, and I also just want to say that, you probably don't realize this, but what you're doing there is very inspiring in terms of all the things we've talked about today. But with you being a strong, experienced female executive leading it is super cool to me. I just want to say that because I think it's important to say, and I think you're doing great work, so thank you so much.

Aimee: Thank you. Yeah, thank you. I appreciate that. It's fun when you get up every day and you really enjoy what you do and the job that you get to do. It makes it so well worth it, so well worth it, and I continue to look forward to being able to share what has happened here with more folks, so come and see us.

Kristin: That's awesome.

Aimee: Yeah.

Kristin: We will have links to everything, but let's tell my amazing audience where they can find immediate information on Bike Bentonville and Bentonville in general.

Aimee: Yeah, so you can visit our website. It's VisitBentonville/BikeBentonville is where you can find most of the bike related materials or visit Bentonville.com to really look at planning your trip. You can follow us on social media at Bike Bentonville, and visit Bentonville on both Instagram, we share a lot of content and resources between both that, as well as Facebook.

Kristin: Awesome. Well thank you so much, Amy. I really can't wait to see what else you and your colleagues are leading down there, and I will definitely see you hopefully a couple of times this year in person.

Aimee: Great. Well I look forward to it. Thanks, Kristin.