

Bikers Rights!

It was a typical early morning in Chicago's Lincoln Park. The LP Moms were sunken-eyed and over-cafeinated as they jolted their overpriced prams above deep rivets in the sidewalk. The slow, warm breeze carried through the ash trees of Trebes Park. It was the perfect weather for standing around to gawk at the delinquent biker who had been pulled over by a police officer in an SUV. That morning, I was the delinquent biker.

Coming from Ukrainian Village to DePaul University around 9 AM for my biology requirement, I was merely a block or so from my destination when by the grace of god I hit the intersection of Webster and Racine perfectly. Yielding at the stop sign, I glided gracefully through the intersection with a black sedan. *The Growlers* were blaring through my headphones. I was as excited as I possibly could be for BIO239. If you ask me, a long time city biker, my law-abiding skills that morning were angelic. The officer did not agree.

Full lights and sirens mind you, the officer was clearly out for my blood since I neglected to spill some in the accident that I never caused. As the 5'3" officer hopped out of the SUV and came jogging toward me with a pointed finger and her curly brown hair bobbing in that sweet summer breeze, she yelled "what the hell were you thinking?" I was blank faced. One of my white Apple headphone pieces was stuffed into my right ear, softly humming "Someday," while the other dangled in front of my shoulder. "Take those fucking headphones out of your ear." She was becoming louder. "It's illegal to bike with those in."

The officer went on, in full detail, to describe my criminal commotion of running a stop sign. I'll spare you the details, but she screamed at me before demanding to see my license. I told her I was sorry that we saw the situation differently; I was sure it was legal to yield at a stop sign. After ripping my license out of my hand she retreated to her SUV ahead of us. When she reached the driver door and turned around, she yelled at me for not following her to the vehicle despite the fact she never gave me orders to do so. She wasn't going to "yell at me from [there]." As I walked toward her, I explained that I would never walk up behind an officer without direct instructions because she has a loaded gun on her hip and if I spook her she could easily shoot me dead. I didn't think the gawking LP Moms would be thrilled with the mess of my murder. I checked to see if she was wearing a body camera; she wasn't.

I attempted to explain this while slowly approaching her, she droned, "I can't hear you...I can't hear you...You're too far away from me..." I couldn't stop staring at her gun. She questioned me about my current address – no I hadn't biked here from Wisconsin and I had a new address in Ukrainian Village – and then she ran my name for warrants.

Ted Villare of Active Transportation Alliance (ATA) wrote me in an email that the best resource about bicycle law enforcement in Chicago is Chicago Complete Streets. Their enforcement page includes links to a 2013 PDF of the City of Chicago Biking Ordinance. This ordinance, signed by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, states that bikers "shall be subject to all of the duties applicable to the

driver of a vehicle.” Meaning that as the biker, I was required to fully stop at stop signs and to wait for the light to change at stoplights. The officer was right about that.

According to the article “How Strictly do Chicago Police Enforce Bike Traffic Laws?” by Meribah Knight (WBEZ Chicago), Ron Burke, the executive director of ATA, says he believes that over time, as the cycling community grows, more people will begin to comply with the rules. Knight furthers Burkes statement when she reports, “building a better biking infrastructure also builds more compliant riders.” According to the City of Chicago, after building two-way protected bike lanes on Dearborn Street, obedience of red light traffic laws went up 161%.

Another way to foster a better biking infrastructure would be for the City of Chicago to adopt the Idaho Stop laws which states bikers may treat stops signs as a yield and may treat stoplights as a stop sign when red. I was mistaken in thinking that these laws applied to Chicagoans, when the law currently only applies in Idaho, some cities in Colorado, and Paris. These laws have the hope of better transportation for all. Asking bikers to fully stop at all stop signs disrupts the flow of traffic. Current laws were written with the automobiles in mind, but when due credit is given to the biker, it turns out that things run a lot more smoothly. Biking laws should be designed to allow bikers to travel quickly and efficiently. Bikes are less stable at slower speeds, which causes more accidents. Forcing bikers to clip in and out of pedals frequently also causes more accidents. Two studies have been conducted on the Idaho Stop proving that these laws resulted in 14% less crashes.

So, fine. I was rightfully pulled over by the officer and I could have rightfully been ticketed up to \$200. However, there is no law stating that it is illegal to wear headphones while biking (score!), but it is illegal to text or talk on the phone while biking. Looking back, I feel only sort-of stupid. Sure, I was wrong, but she had a bad attitude. But, to be fair, I was being a total brat. We were both wrong in the end.

After she checked my record, I was cleared. We played tug of war over my license as she lectured me to “follow the rules of the road.” I freed my license from her hand and scoffed. She told me I’d “make great road kill someday” before peeling off and making an illegal u-turn in an intersection. I wished she had given me a ticket as a souvenir for this bullshit debacle.

And so to the lovely officer who tried to teach me a lesson: thanks? You were right in the moment, but I’m right in the long run. At least I’ve learned to bike more carefully when cops are around.