

The origins and escalation of Boulders beloved cruisers.

story by **siena scornavacco & julia perian**

For decades, “Happy” Thursday Cruisers in Boulder have been synonymous with dancing, music, positivity, and bicycle traffic. However, in the summer of 2023, mobs of teenage bikers caused a government-sanctioned public park closure. So, how did this treasured Boulder tradition evolve into organized chaos?

On June 29, 2023, the City of Boulder Parks and Recreation department published a statement regarding the summer of 2023’s Thursday nights.

“The City of Boulder Parks and Recreation Department (BPR) is instituting nighttime park closures following recent incidents where large groups of 200-250 youth, ranging in ages from 10-18, have lit fireworks and caused damage at several parks facilities,” reads the statement. “City property that has been damaged since April include a porta-a-potty, graffiti on playground equipment, and fireworks damage to a vehicle,” read the statement.

Although the Cruisers have been under police and public scrutiny for the last few years, the situation was severely escalated this summer. Concern over underage drinking, coupled with occasional fireworks, shifted to include vandalism, destruction of city property, and mass fighting.

“Over the years the Cruisers have had to be shut down multiple times due to repetitive activity, the same challenges are seen every year and the city eventually gets to a point where they have to shut it down,” said Lucy Hessling (10). With this behavior becoming an annual occurrence, the BPR has been forced to take action.

In response to these events, the Boulder Parks and Recreation Department turned to drastic measures. “The city has adopted an emergency rule... that will close all

BPR-maintained parks on Thursday nights at 9 p.m. instead of 11 p.m. Community members visiting parks after 9 p.m. on these Thursdays and on July 4 may receive a citation,” BPR wrote.

However, the Cruisers were not always a police and BPR target. 20 years prior, this event’s inception consisted of a mere handful of eccentric Boulderites who simply loved to bike.

Ryan VanDuzer, a Cruiser enthusiast who joined the ride in 1999 – just eight years after its start in 1991 – painted a vivid picture of the Cruiser’s origin.

“It started in ‘91 or ‘92. There’s a shop on east Pearl St. called Sports Garage, and they started meeting up with some buddies, in the early days, and they would ride around on Thursdays, casually. We’re talking five or six people. And it slowly got bigger and bigger,” said VanDuzer.

Cruisers started organically, and were initially centered around a common love of biking. They served as an uplifting community activity, still prevalent in adult Boulder Bike Nights, which Vanduzer currently participates in.

“We have bikes with stereos and big speakers, and we have dance parties and

do all that stuff. It’s so fun [for me], it’s like weekly therapy. You get to go out, be a little goofy, and hang out with friends, and ride your bike,” said VanDuzer.

Cruisers and Boulder Bike Nights, although similar in idea and origin, have separated through time; the former a now controversial teenaged event, and the latter reminiscent of original Cruisers, with adults and older residents in attendance.

“I heard a lot of times [the teenagers] weren’t even riding bikes, they were just meeting up at the parks and partying, and driving to the next stop. That is not cruising culture. You’re not cruising,” said Vanduzer.

He then added his point of view on the event’s purposeful split. “It used to be all one, but the adults made an initiative to kind of ditch the kids. We didn’t want to have them with us, because it was a liability. We’re having a great time, and we’re following the

rules, and these jerk-offs are getting us in trouble,” said Vanduzer.

Are these teenage “jerk-offs” truly the downfall of happy Thursdays?

I’M ALL ABOUT MORE PEOPLE RIDING BIKES, YOU JUST HAVE TO FOLLOW THE LAW



Fireworks are set off at North Boulder Park during a cruiser. Photo by Abby Henderson



Teens gather at one of the Cruiser’s stops, Eben G. Fine Park. photo courtesy of emma

Many Boulder teens share a common frustration with the separated Boulder bikers, surrounding the escalation of these events, yet they feel this traditionalist perspective lacks nuance.

Fairview Cruiser attendees described their view on this Thursday night dispute.

“I go because it’s a great place to meet new people and to have fun,” said Arissa Fisher (12).

Hessling added, “I started attending Cruisers because it was a fun community event...the weekly themes, bike riding/exercise, spending time with friends, taking photos, and making memories.”

While these teenagers are passionate about the community brought together by the Cruisers, they also recognize the evolution of violence plaguing these events.

Fisher said, “The first Cruiser I went to was... in 2021. It was amazing. I biked the whole thing. It was really fun. You got a chance to meet a lot of people.”

However, she noted that “Throughout the years, like the most recent year of 2023, it was really violent. There were always fireworks, and they were really short, and there was a lot of police attendance.”

Frequent physical altercations contributed to an aforementioned string of violence. “I think a lot of people started using Cruisers as a place to start fights,” said Fisher.

“They think ‘oh yeah, we’ll just go to the Cruisers and jump this person, because they’ll definitely be there,’” said Ashley Lambaum (11).

Thursdays became more of a fight-night than a community builder -- an antithesis of their original purpose. What triggered this shift? The City of Boulder and adult Cruiser riders point to general teenage recklessness, but some students blame the issues on a more complicated culprit.

Lambaum said, “It shifted from being mainly Boulder kids to everyone in a 30 mile radius. It’s Broomfield kids, Longmont kids, all of them.”

“The crowd at first was mainly upperclassmen in high school. It started out where it was mainly seniors or graduates, but now it has become young children, like middle schoolers and freshmen,” added Fisher.

In addition to attendee demographic changes, they note the rise of an aggressive culture amongst youth.

“I think the media has influenced aggression—a lot of things we see in the media, such as riots and protests. Since those riots and protests have started becoming more violent, that’s just like a reflection on people’s actions. It glamorizes drugs,” said Fisher.

Landblom added, “The younger kids, the 8th graders and 7th graders...They all have TikTok, and they’re all getting influenced by more aggressive people.”

A characteristically Boulder issue, privilege plays another role in the problem.

“I feel like that’s definitely a reflection on our generation. I think some Boulder teens lack respect for property because of money and privilege,” said Fisher.

We spoke to the “jerkoffs” themselves in regards to reckless behavior. The following students chose to remain anonymous due to the nature of the subject.

“It’s a Boulder party culture in general. Living in a college town, we see drinking habits from college students very heavily,” said one student.

“There’s this connotation around drinking where you can make excuses while drinking. It takes some of the social pressure off. It’s an idea that you’re not responsible for your actions when you drink. I think that relates to people being so irresponsible and damaging.”

Further, these students noted a culture within the culture shift.

Another student said, “People struggling seek each other out because they relate to one another, and it just kind of spirals out from there. In a way, that’s kind of like the Cruisers. They’re where

these people escape from their issues or problems they can’t really vocalize, so there’s built up emotions, which then causes them to not only drink, but to do these really damaging or irresponsible actions.”

This self awareness is hopeful for the future of the Cruisers. If teens can recognize the causations of the problem, then a future solution is possible.

“In the future, I would like to see people making better decisions so we are able to keep them going throughout the summer, since it has been a Boulder tradition since the 90s,” said Hessling.

Both adults and teens have the common belief to continue these infamous Boulder Bike Nights. “As far as my vision, keep it going. A lot of people go and say it’s their one day a week to go a little bit wild, and have fun, and dress up, and let loose,” said VanDuzer.

After the Thursday nights shut down by the BPR, is it possible to revive the positive energy the Cruisers originated in?

As of now, teenage Cruisers evidently cannot coexist with Boulder Bike Nights, or the surrounding Boulder community. Struggling to maintain a balance between enjoyment and safety, the Cruisers seem stuck in a destructive pattern. If Boulder teens can channel their frustration with this pattern as a catalyst for change, there is hope to restore the event to its origin.

Along those lines, if the adult bikers and community members take effort to recognize the deeper issues affecting our community beyond the surface of a reckless teenage stereotype, a more lasting and impactful answer to this ever-repeating problem could be attained through collaboration.

The bottom line? A solution is possible, but attaining it will be a challenge. Next summer, instead of waiting for a reckless disaster or a public policy announcement, proactively demonstrate a basic level of respect to protect this beloved tradition once and for all.

