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Transcript for *influencers!* Episode 11: Fiona Campbell

Phil Latz: As you'll soon discover, Fiona Campbell is quietly and calmly spoken, and quite happy to stay out of the limelight but when it comes to being a true influencer, Fiona is a giant. I know that she's highly respected by her colleagues and peers, but I suspect that even those who might be trying to block her progress and some of her ideas also develop a grudging respect for the tenacity and sharp strategy that hides beneath her quiet, calm, exterior. Fiona, thanks for coming on Influencers.

Fiona Campbell: My pleasure. Thanks for inviting me, Phil.

Phil: You're welcome. Now, you've always struck me as a very methodical type of person. I believe you had a computer programming background, is that correct?

Fiona: Yes, that's right. For about 20 years, I was a mainframe programmer, mostly in the finance industry programming in COBOL and Natural. Methodical and logical was my thing.

Phil: Very good. That sounds very heavy to me, and did you also live in the UK for a while?

Fiona: Yes, for a few years, I had a couple of programming jobs in the South of England and then in London. I guess it was the experience of living there for a few years and I didn't call myself a cyclist, but I used a bike to get around locally, just little bits, and got used to that. It was coming back from England to hear that, I guess I saw the big contrast in conditions and driver behavior.

Phil: That's exactly what I was wondering, whether your UK experience had any influence on you and what you ended up doing.

Fiona: I think a lot of people who are active in the cycling area when I speak to them, they've lived somewhere else where it's better. It's the contrast that motivates, wanting to help change things.

Phil: Yes, absolutely. When did you actually-- you grow up in Sydney, did you?

Fiona: Yes. Grew up in Sydney, leafy northwestern suburbs, bit of bush, and I did ride to school one time when I was 16 on one day after I'd spent the Christmas holidays with a friend who liked writing and we'd ridden a bit over the holidays, and on my first day back at school in year 11, I rode to school, but it was a convent school. The nun told me that I was never, ever to do it again. It was most unladylike. I don't know whether that has been part of what's made me determined as well.



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Phil: [chuckles] Don't ever tell Fiona not to do something, aye.

Fiona: Exactly.

Phil: It wasn't the traffic that was a problem. It was something else.

Fiona: Yes. When I came back from England, it was the traffic. It was the driver's behavior and the condition of the roads, the roads were shocking. There were no facilities, but in London, where I was living, there wasn't really any infrastructure either, but at least the drivers are polite. The contrast for me was obvious with the body language of drivers. If a London driver flashes their headlights at you, it means, "Be my guest, come in ahead of me at the intersection." In Australia, it means, "Get out of my way before I run you over."

Phil: Now, I'd love to include a photo with this video of you riding with your Jack Russells. How long have they been your riding companions?

Fiona: For nine years now.

Phil: Goodness.

Fiona: When we got Cody and his mother arrived, Cody was a nine-week-old puppy. It didn't take long before we put them into cargo bikes and started getting them used to it. The mother, Dolores, is a bit reluctant at first but they just absolutely love it. If I say trikies or head towards the garage, they're out there and waiting. The previous dogs we had were the same. They all sell up.

Phil: Dogs like riding and do the dogs have a favorite ride? Did they tell you of their preferred route by any chance?

Fiona: Anywhere where we can stop at a park on the way and they can run alongside the bike for a while.

Phil: You did quite a few years of work voluntarily before you actually moved and got your position at or eight initial positions at the City of Sydney. How does it compare if you like working on the inside to working on the outside?

Fiona: There are frustrations always, but it's much better on the inside because I can really dedicate myself the whole time to my mission of making Sydney bike-friendly. I was working full-



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time in computer programming, but it was by night that I was doing bicycle advocacy work and you'd know I was on the executive of the cycling promotion alliance. I was for a while, the vice president of the Bicycle Federation of Australia, I was active in a couple of local bike groups.

I was writing submissions for Bicycle New South Wales, and I was the cycling representative on the Australian Bicycle Council, and also on the National Road Safety Strategy panel. I was also, for five years, a director on the Pedestrian Council of Australia Board.

Phil: What did you do in your spare time, Fiona?

Fiona: I was very lucky to have an understanding family and supportive husband who put up with all my advocacy work but basically nothing else.

Phil: What years are we talking roughly from, until say from when you returned from the UK until you got a full-time role?

Fiona: 10 years. It was from February 1998 when I joined Bicycle New South Wales, my local bicycle group, and started going to critical mass rides. It was 2008 that I got the job in the City of Sydney.

Phil: Looking at that 10-year voluntary career, if you like, and I know you've still done other voluntary things since, but just focusing on that particular era, what would you say were some of your biggest wins?

Fiona: One of them was getting Marrickville Council to reinstate the bike budget. Marrickville Council had a bike budget, a piddling little bike budget, and the year that I'm thinking of, which was the year 2000, they published the draft budget and it had an amount of \$20,000, which is enough to build a curb ramp or something, not anything much. Bike Marrickville, we organized a bit of our campaign and got a whole lot of people to write in because by local government act, councils have to take into account any submissions that they get on the draft budget.

It turns out, we wrote more submissions than anyone else put together. There was pressure on them to reinstate the bike budget. I spoke at the council meeting where they were considering the draft budget and spoke about the benefits of cycling and how they needed to allocate the budget towards it. The decision was to cancel, it was overturned so that the Mayor Barry Cotter was trying to get it canceled completely, taken out that 20,000 completely. We got that overturned and the bike budget piddling as it was kept.

The following evening I was at the Council Chambers for another meeting and the Mayor Barry



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Cotter saw me there, and started yelling at me and screaming at me that I was lying to the counselors. My speech was all totally fact-checked and all accurate. That I was stacking meetings maybe because there were some friends who'd come along to sit in the gallery while I gave the speech. He brought me to tears and that was my first experience of political bullying. Again, it didn't stop me. It only makes me more determined when I made resistant to making the change. That was one.

Phil: How long did it take until Marrickville Council's budget increased above \$20,000 once you save the budget line still being in there?

Fiona: The next year it was higher. It was, I think, 50,000 and then stayed, gradually increasing over time. When the three councils merged into Inner West Council, it was Marrickville who was by then, well ahead and had a few cycleway projects underway, which are being delivered now, which is just warms my heart to ride along one of those every morning now.

Phil: The mayor, is he still the mayor or is he moved on?

Fiona: No, I don't know what he's doing now. I and the others in BIKESydney had been lobbying for them to do a bike plan. This was at the time when it had just merged with South Sydney Council. Lucy Turnbull was the Lord Mayor, and I'd been lobbying for them to do a bike plan. We'd finally heard from an inside source that they had started working on a bike plan, but they hadn't told us that was the case. We suspected it probably wouldn't be terribly well done. My meeting with the Lord Mayor was unsuccessful at getting much of anything, really.

We'd heard that they were having a big event in the Town Hall called Greening Sydney. It turned out it was about green buildings, green walls, green roofs. It was not something that we could really infiltrate usefully. What I did was I got a friend who was a designer to design up a little lapel sticker with a picture of a bike in the middle and greening Sydney written above and below the bike. I colored each one in by hand with a green highlighter. We had a couple of 100 of them, and we stood on the Town Hall steps.

As people came in, we said, "Do you want to show support for the city? We're here being doing a bike plan. You can show your support where this lapel badge." Almost every single person that we spoke to willingly put it on, including the governor of New South Wales, Marie Bashir. The Lord Mayor Lucy Turnbull, who was hosting that every person that she spoke to almost during that event, or shake shook cans with, would've been wearing a little bicycle badge on their lapel.

I was pretty happy with that as a way of trying to show, despite all our efforts, not coming to



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anything at that point to show that there was strong community support.

Phil: Wow, that is a really interesting piece. Dare I say, ambush marketing. Very, very interesting. In summary of that volunteer era, if someone watching this is involved in a local club or bug or whatever organization, what tips would you have? If you had to give just a couple of tips on what strategies or the 101s that they really should be doing, what would you say?

Fiona: Think carefully about what it is you want to achieve and line everything up with that. Then, think about who your allies and who are the unlikely allies that you might be able to draw in to help you to influence the people who make the decision.

Phil: Anything else if I dig a little deeper?

Fiona: I've actually written a bit of a guide about how to do advocacy projects a long time ago. Maybe if people are interested in more, maybe getting contact in marketing, I can share that.

Phil: Well, we could link that to the notes with this YouTube, that would be very much appreciated. Let's move on to your career at the City of Sydney. When did you join, and what was your original role?

Fiona: I joined in March 2008. I didn't get the job at first. BIKESydney had been lobbying for the bike plan. In 2006, the draft bike plan was exhibited, and BIKESydney was lobbying to try and make sure that council also hired a bike planner because we found it's so difficult to try and find out who was the right person we needed to talk to about this project or that project or this different issue. We wanted someone, a central point of contact that we could hold accountable, and be the primary harassment point for us. We wanted council to hire a bike planner.

Initially, the general manager at the time said that was never going to happen. By the time the bike plan was adopted by council, we'd managed to get that incorporated into the bike plan as one of the actions. The council advertised for the role. I remember sending the advertisement around to all the people that I knew that worked in the field, saying we need to get someone really good for this role.

My good friend, Vera, who worked for like art council and did most of the bike activities there, she emailed me back and said, "But if you look at the job description as everything that you're already doing on a volunteer basis, why don't you apply?" "I'm a computer program. I could never apply. I don't have any local government experience. I don't have any engineering or transport planning qualifications," but she pushed me and convinced me to apply. In the end, there were



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three people shortlisted for the job. One of them was Vera.

One of them was me and then a third person who I didn't know at the time. Vera told me that she did really badly in the interview because she was determined that I should get the job she wanted me to get, but in the end, it was the third person who got the job and should have got the job. She had great experience doing a very similar role for another council and was ideal for the role. She got the job and my husband, Paul, said, "You shouldn't help her. You shouldn't work with her. That job should have been yours."

I'm like, "Of course I'm going to help. I want to achieve a better Sydney." Anyway, we became friends, but after six months, she was poached back by the council where she'd previously worked. The role became vacant. I quickly put up my hand and called the director and said, "I'm still here." I think it was a difficult decision, a challenging decision for them to make because I had been a vocal critic from the outside. I'd been harassing people mercilessly about projects that weren't good enough for cycling.

Phil: Should they allow the barbarians inside the tent?

Fiona: Well, is it better to have me on the inside or the outside really is what it comes down to. They checked with various people that project managers and the road safety officer who I had been in regular contact with for a long time. They all supported me being employed. I got the job. That is my dream job, as it turns out, and every day since then has been fantastic. It's full of challenges. I'm doing different things all the time, learning so much, and able to make a real difference to Sydney.

Phil: Hard to imagine, but correct me if I'm wrong, that role was the first full-time role specifically in this area. Now, you head, I don't know whether you call it an office department division, but you've had quite a team at different times working under your supervision, correct?

Fiona: Yes. I started off as transport planner, brackets cycling, but after a year or two, my manager at the time said that the role needed to be, what do you call it, upgraded because I needed to have more ability to discuss things at higher levels in other areas of council to make sure that the strategy was being implemented. Became Manager Cycling Strategy. I currently have a team of 5, before COVID, it was 10. That team was brought together when we were building quite a lot of cycleways in the early days.

We were building Bourke Street, the ones in Alexandria, Union Street, and College Street, and Kent Street. I think all at the same time in around 2010. There was huge media opposition. There



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was outcry, there was Alan Jones calling for a rally at Town Hall for people to oppose the building of cycleways. The CEO brought together a team, the cycling hot team, where we would have the multidisciplinary team sitting all together. The media person, the marketing person, the behavior change, and the planning all together so that we could really make sure we worked closely together, and got through the challenging times that we had.

Phil: You mentioned briefly the Bourke Street protected cycleway, which people might not remember the extraordinary concerted campaign between the daily Telegraph and the Alan Jones for people outside New South Wales, watching this, just insert the name of your equivalent shock jock, if you like, in your state. It really was quite a firestorm at the time. I think the sky actually fall down. I can't remember what actually happened in the end.

Fiona: No, such a successful project in the end. It was interesting. When I first started, the consultation was starting for the project, and we had public meetings for people to come to and people spoke so strongly against the cycleway that it would be a total disaster, and the amount of correspondence that was coming into the Lord Mayor and to the council, talking about how bad the project was. I must admit, I even had second thoughts myself, maybe we're doing the wrong project in the wrong place.

What we did was we went and door knocked on the people who lived along Bourke Street, and it was a real eye-opener because, from the correspondence, it looked like everyone opposed the project but when we went and door knocked and spoke to people individually, almost everyone I spoke to was either ambivalent, didn't mind at all, or supportive of the project, but those people don't ride, they're not vocal, and contacting the media. You only ever hear from the people who are opposed to projects generally. I was just blown away by the level of support or ambivalence that there was for the project.

In the end, the project was done and the results are fabulous. Nobody on Bourke Street now would say that the cycleway should be removed. It's a beautiful integral part of the street. I remember reading a letter from someone who lived on Bourke Street, who said, "I don't ride a bike and I never will, but Bourke Street is now such a pleasant place to walk." The traffic is calmer because the road is narrower. That means it's easier for someone, a resident who parks on the other side of the street to be able to cross the road. It's quieter. It's just a beautiful street, a beautiful street.

Phil: Yes. Indeed and real estate values have gone up and businesses have boomed and on it goes. For the benefit of those who don't live in or near the City of Sydney, local government area itself, I just did a bit of research and it's actually one of the smallest local governments in



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the area, and only the 15th largest in Australia by population, 242,000, that last count, but it has another half a million or so that visit and work there each day for shopping or whatever it might be but it's actually one of the wealthiest councils in Australia.

It's got a budget approaching a billion dollars a year now, and \$12 billion in assets, so small geographically, but really one of the largest and most powerful councils in Australia. Given that you are in charge of that particular division within the council, do you feel more constrained or empowered now that you are working with such a major government organization?

Fiona: Oh, definitely empowered. I mean, for that really, I have to thank the CEO and the whole organization as well as the councilors and Lord Mayor, everyone is so supportive of the goals because it makes so much sense. It's not an ideological thing. You said it's a small council, but it's a crucial importance economically. For example, businesses want to locate their headquarters, Google, or any other one where it's a nice place to live and it's easy to get around. For it to be easy to get around, you need to not have the whole place car-dependent.

You need to have good public transport and easy access for walking and cycling. That makes it a place that attracts companies that's what businesses want. We can see that because, for example, just over a four-year period, in the city center, businesses invested \$57 million in end-of-trip facilities. Not because they had to, they were retrofitting, not because of council regulations, but actually retrofitting their existing buildings.

Phil: End-of-trip facilities is actually a bit of geeky jargon. What do you mean by end-of-trip facilities, Fiona?

Fiona: Bike parking, showers, lockers, change rooms, that sort of thing. Providing for their employees to be able to ride to work and then shower and change and park their bike securely. That's more than the state government was investing in that area and it shows that employers are keen to make sure that their staff can take a healthy option to work.

Phil: While we're talking money, how much is the City of Sydney investing each year in cycling infrastructure these days? Has it gone up, gone down?

Fiona: It was \$11 million a year on average. I haven't actually looked at what this current year is. It would be a lot more than that. Now, we've got just in the last few years, the state government has been funding a lot of our cycleway construction as well. That's enabled us to increase the amount as well.



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Phil: The rate of progress you'd say is increasing from what you're saying.

Fiona: Definitely, yes. Over the first 10 years, we built 15 kilometers of separated cycleway so about one and a half kilometers a year. Then, in 2020, including the pop-ups, we did nine kilometers in one year. Now, we're going back and making some of those pop-ups permanent, but we've now really increased the pace of projects at the moment. We have five cycleway projects under construction, a few in the city center, Pitt Street, North, making that permanent King Street between Pitt and Phillip Street is under construction, we finished in a month or two.

College Street, it's just started construction, building that back after it was removed in the past. Then, a number of other projects in Erskineville and Alexandria area.

Phil: What's the timing on the much-wanted Oxford Street project, which is a major arterial?

Fiona: That'll start construction in one year's time, just after WorldPride is finished, the International Mardi Gras because that will be in Sydney and that will take about a year to just under a year to build.

Phil: Anyone watching this, who's either working within local government anywhere in Australia or perhaps overseas, and wants to try, or they might once again be trying to influence local government to help move them forward, but particularly those working inside like you do now, now that you've had a long period as an insider, what would be your advice of how they could help nudge things along in a favorable direction?

Fiona: I guess two things. One is the challenge that you have of decision-makers, supporting decision-makers to go ahead with projects when there's some opposition. There are always some people who object to projects and might be someone who loses the convenience, having a parking spot right outside their house, instead of having to walk around the corner to one. It's really important to do either the door knocking or a proper telephone survey as representative or something to show decision-makers that the level of community support is actually much stronger than the impression that they will get just from the letters they get to make sure that the right decision is made.

The other is to stoke your pipeline because that's what's served us really well. In 2018, when we adopted the cycling strategy, the consultation that we did for that showed great support among the community for our cycling strategy but the number one comment we got was that you should do more faster. During 2019, my good colleague, Beth, did a huge amount of work looking at all the processes and procedures that we have both the external ones seeking approval and the



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internal processes, how we do the procurement, and materials and design, and what can we do to build more faster? As a result of that, we had a lot more projects in the design pipeline where we had concepts already starting to be developed when COVID hit. That was what enabled us to take the opportunity with COVID, when the government said to, as a pandemic response to make sure people can still safely get around want to do some pop-up cycleways. We had some plans ready to go. We've since then kept doing that of having lots of design projects in the pipeline so that we have projects ready to go.

One or two of them will always hit a snag or a delay. That means we've still got other projects that we can continue with. Get some designs in the pipeline.

Phil: Community consultation to give political cover and keep that pipeline full because a few might fall by the wayside. Excellent, I've got one final question. [crosstalk] Sorry, go on.

Fiona: The community consultation is a really important part of it, making sure that you take the time to really talk to all the important stakeholders. If there are key businesses along the route or people have a particular interest or need, making sure that you do everything you can to incorporate those, and all the comments that we get from the consultation the design manager goes through all those. As much as we can, we will tweak the design to incorporate people's comments. We don't decide that if people don't like it, we're not going to do it.

It's not a vote on whether or not the project should go ahead. It's we want to hear from people what design tweaks need to be made to make it work well. Genuinely, being able to make changes to meet people's needs, I think is really important for a successful project.

Phil: Excellent and in indeed. Final question, let's jump in the Tardis, I don't know if you're a Doctor Who fan or not. We'll go forward in time just 10 years. We're not going too crazy. We hop out in 2032 back in the City of Sydney and we look around, what changes would you like to be looking at?

Fiona: By then, I think we should have a fairly comprehensive, safe network, and that will facilitate anyone who wants to ride to be able to do that. It'll attract people to riding, and by then, I expect we'll have far exceeded our target of 10% of trips to be by bike.

Phil: Well, this is being recorded. We'll be able to review this in 10 years' time. I hope that what you predict is correct. Fiona Campbell, thanks for being an influencer.

Fiona: Thank you very much, Phil.