

influencers!

Changing Minds Changing Worlds

**CHRIS
NOLTE**



Transcript for *influencers!* Season 2 Episode 2: Chris Nolte

Phil Latz: Chris, thanks for being an Influencer. Where were you born and raised?

Chris Nolte: I grew up in New York in the States. Long Island is where I grew up, not really a bike place so much, but eventually moved to Brooklyn where I have my shop now, and then lived in California for a little while. Now, I'm back on the East Coast actually split my time between Philadelphia and New York.

Phil: What was your first experience of cycling?

Chris: Probably on a BMX bike. Pretty early days, I ended up getting a GT Performer. I just really enjoyed the freedom that it brought me enjoying just riding around the neighborhood. At that time, I really would go pretty far adventures on the bike. That was a lot of fun.

Phil: You started really young, in the bike industry, you bought 55 bikes in a police auction, when you were 18 years old, how did all that work out for you?

Chris: I always had a bit of an entrepreneurial spirit, and pretty early on, always had an interest in bikes. One day I came across these bikes in a police auction, and I bought 55 of them loaded up in massive truck. I was selling some of them but ended up not long after I was in the military and got called up went overseas, but I didn't end up selling all of them but my first attempt wasn't as successful. I guess, is my business these days.

Phil: Let's talk about you mentioned the military. You served in the Iraq War. What were some of the things that you saw and the experiences that might have affected you from that experience?

Chris: Joining the military, I wouldn't necessarily call myself a true patriot. I didn't have anything against America or anything like that. I'm born and raised there, and I support my country but I'm not sure if I joined to so much fight for the country, as to really just do something that I felt was good, give me some discipline and structure, and really help pay for school. I really didn't come up with much. I think the military was offering that so I gave it a shot. I joined the Army Reserves, and I was driving trucks in the army, specifically fuel trucks.

At that time, when I joined in 2000, I wasn't anticipating going to war or anything like that, nothing really happened in the past 10 years or so but sure enough, a year later 9/11 happened. Then a year later, I was in Kuwait in 2002. Shortly thereafter, from the start of the Iraq War, I was driving fuel trucks in Iraq, supporting the infantry et cetera. That was quite an experience. Definitely one of the most impactful events of my life, I would say. It really made me think a

influencers!

Changing Minds Changing Worlds

**CHRIS
NOLTE**



lot about the choices that I make on a daily basis and how our dependence on oil, specifically foreign oil in this instance. This dependence seemed to really start a lot of these conflicts or so I was seeing.

I was not too comfortable with that idea of returning back. These days, this was really a big motivating factor for what I do on a daily basis.

Phil: Do you think there's a disconnect between the cause and effect, for example, Western Europe right now, Russia is at war with Ukraine, and that Western Europe is actually funding Russia to fight Ukraine by paying a fortune for their oil and gas. Do you think there's a disconnect?

Chris: I think we've learned a lot from the Netherlands in the '70s, the fuel crisis, et cetera, was a really big deal. I think they made some drastic changes during that time. Part of that change was actually switching the focus to more on the bicycle, as opposed to the automobile, which had more dependency on resources. Just if you think about resources, in general, it's not just fuel. If we can think about the choices we make on a daily basis, like, how many resources are we using just to do what we need to do? Even thinking about that, like car ownership, what does it cost to actually own a car just outside of just the fuel costs?

How does that create certain demands in our lives that we need to make certain decisions and work in a certain way? Where if we ride a bicycle, live more human scale, there's a lot more possibilities with our lives. I think in doing so, it puts us in a less vulnerable place to make decisions that might compromise our values. I think that's ultimately what's going on throughout the world is that we're making a lot of decisions that compromise our values, whether it be, purchasing oil from a place that is not really in line with our values and maybe in some ways supporting activities that are not in line with our values by proxy in some ways.

I'm not sure I get into too much of that stuff these days because I think in a lot of ways, the way I look at it is, instead of trying to stop the negative, I just tried to promote the positive. I think that's what in a lot of ways when I returned back from my racket, I had felt that I wanted to stop the negative. I was like, "Hey, I don't like what's going on here. I don't want this to happen anymore. I need to stop this," but then I recognize that that's maybe not the most effective way to do it because if you don't present an alternative solution, how are we going to do this?

That's really where the bicycle came in and I realized that, "Hey, there's other places that have done this successfully and maybe we could do that as well." It's a big challenge, but I welcome it.

Phil: You returned classified as a disabled combat veteran. What did that mean in a practical term? Did you get rehabilitation or a pension or, how are you traveling at that time?

influencers!

Changing Minds Changing Worlds

**CHRIS
NOLTE**



Chris: When I returned back, while I was in Iraq, I injured my back in a truck crash. It really left me in a rough spot, because I had always been relatively physical and active and I wasn't able to maintain the same level of activities as I once did. That was really troubling for me. When I returned back to the US, the military was kind of like, "Okay, you're free to go now." I said, "Well, no, I'm not so ready for that, I think I need some help to get myself a little bit closer to where I was before I do so."

I did some rehabilitation in New Jersey at a military base there. I stayed online for a little while longer, and eventually returned back, but I still had a ways to go as far as my real rehabilitation. Really, it took some time and it wasn't just the physical, there was definitely other things going on in my mind. Trying to deal with things, trying to deal with living in this, in war, you really have to revert back to sort of an animal state and then you return back to civilization, and how do you deal with that? Trying to work through all that stuff. It really took me a long while to figure that out. Even today, I still have issues with my back and stuff like that, but it's a lot better than it was at that time for sure.

Phil: Not long after you got back, you bought your first e-bike.

Chris: Turned back in 2005 and about six years later, after not really being too physically active for a while, a friend of mine had an electric bike. Many of my friends were going out and biking. Not so much for sport, more for recreation, and just getting out and enjoying each other's company. I felt intimidated about that prospect. I think there was a lot of things that intimidated me about life those days but the electric bikes seem to intrigue me. I tried my friends out. I said, "Well, it's pretty cool. Maybe that can get me out there with my friends and such."

I started doing some research and I found that there's rather popular in other places. I built one for myself, which is fitted actually a police auction bike with the motor on it. It was just thrown together but it worked. It got me out there and I really enjoyed it but through that process of researching, I realized that there weren't many other companies doing this. I also realized that in America, electric bikes were not so popular but in Germany and throughout Europe, they're really grown in popularity. In China, they're really massive.

I say, "Well, hey, this seems like an interesting business opportunity." For myself, always being somewhat entrepreneurial, had a lot of experience with retail, had a lot of experience with e-commerce. Not so much experience with bikes, so I never worked in a bike shop but I had decided shortly thereafter to start a business selling electric bikes.

Phil: You did have a career before that as well with some pretty impressive skills that you built up, can you talk about them and how that might have helped you start a bike business?

influencers!

Changing Minds Changing Worlds

**CHRIS
NOLTE**



Chris: They definitely came from a different approach into this space. As I said, I didn't work in the bike industry at all. I never worked in a bike shop, but I worked in retail. I worked in retail since before I was probably even legally allowed to work in retail. My dad was a manufacturer's rep. He had a friend that had a retail shop, and he really showed me the ropes. I really admired a lot of these retailers, and I saw the way that they interacted with the community, and have their own community. That was something I was interested in, but even more so, something I was even more interested in was the technology side.

One thing I recognized from returning back from Iraq with the injured back that I wasn't really able to use my physical body in the same way that I once did prior. As such, I'm going to need to use my mind more. Now at this time really the internet and computers was really growing in popularity. I figured I could make a career using the internet. I heard a quote a long time ago that the internet is the democratization of the tools of commerce. I said, as somebody that didn't really have too much financial resources said, wait, wow, what that means is that I have access to a lot of things, and I could build something with these tools. I really got into learning it.

I was working for an e-commerce company and I really helped them build up their company pretty significantly. I really helped them build up their company pretty significantly, and through that process, I started experimenting with helping other companies and I eventually went out on my own. During that process, I also went to school. I went to school for computer science. Here I am, I'm building websites for other people, helping them market their business online. I'm in school full time and I have this. While I was in school, I started this business now on electric bike. I have these three big things going on in my life.

When I got out of school, I had to make the decision, do I get a job in the industry, do I continue doing the website stuff, do the, do the bike thing? Ultimately I decided to go all in the bike thing. For me, initially, when I got into the bike thing, it wasn't so much about transportation, and it wasn't so much about lessening our dependence on foreign oil. It was really about me just getting out there, enjoying myself, and helping other people to realize that same benefit. Around that time when I was graduating from school, I realized that this is a transportation thing. That this is in a lot of ways the exact opposite of the type of thing that was participating, this ecosystem that I was participating in the military.

From there I knew that I could go all in on this thing and really devote my life to, and that's really what it's been for the past 10 years.

Phil: You really have devoted your life because you started, I think with a \$20,000 loan that as small as you could be. I think you're even upstairs, which is a crazy place to the e-bike shop to be. I believe in three years you went from absolute tiny to a million dollars a year. That's a remarkable rate of growth. What do you think those secrets to that success were?

influencers!

Changing Minds Changing Worlds

**CHRIS
NOLTE**



Chris: As you said, I really started without much, but I was driven and I worked really hard. I think that that's a lot of it. I saw the opportunity and just went for it and didn't take no for an answer. That was a big thing. If somebody, you're going to say, you're going to start a bike shop on the second floor without an elevator. This is crazy, but I said this is the way I can do it. I believe that this is possible and I want to help other people realize these benefits, and I'm going all in on this. Sure enough, I did that, and eventually, more and more people came along for the ride with me and I got some people to help me out and had a close friend to help me in their early days.

Then eventually my younger brother started working with me and just built it up over time. It's been a wild journey, that's for sure.

Phil: I believe you actually got a fine of \$25,000 from New York City for selling e-bikes, being such a dangerous person, I guess, or what was the story behind that, and did you end up having to, could you fight that fine or what happened in the end?

Chris: One of the most challenging things about starting this business, and I think this happens a lot in these new innovating industries, is that the legislation is not always in line with the technology. Now it's certainly the case in New York where electric bikes in many ways were considered illegal. They were considered unregistered scooters, basically. This was challenging. It worked for me because I was able to sell online. I was able to sell outside of our local market. In a lot of ways, people probably looked at our business model and say, "This is not really sustainable. How are you going to continue to do this?"

Eventually, I moved to New York where they were even more explicitly illegal, but I found a loophole there, which pedal-assist electric bikes were not considered motorized scooters. They weren't explicitly illegal, or at least this is my contention at the time and this was really, I bet the farm on it because I saw the potential in New York how great that was. I said, "Hey, I'm going to do this anyway. I know it's a risk, but really the only way that we're going to make them legal is to go straight to the source and start introducing and having conversations. It's not just going to happen out of nowhere."

I opened the shop despite this challenge, and six months later I got a \$25,000 fine from the city. I was baffled. What am I going to do? It was challenging enough just getting this thing going and having that fine, it was really difficult. I made a bunch of phone calls. I had learned to be resourceful through the military and really learned to connect with people, and get the right person to help me. What ended up happening, I called everybody that I could, but what ended up happening, I called the Mayor's Office of Veteran's Affairs and I said, "Hey, I'm disabled veteran. I just opened this business and I got \$25,000 fine."

They said, "We don't give fines that great in New York." I said, "Well, I have one here." I got a call

influencers!

Changing Minds Changing Worlds

**CHRIS
NOLTE**



two days later and he said I think there was some issues with the paperwork. It's been taken care of. This is the New York way sometimes it's a lot of bureaucracy, but if you know how to move around, you can make things happen. Not long after they came back and gave me another fine. There was a lot of misunderstandings about the law, and it was my interpretation and their interpretation. That time, I decided to not make any calls, and I went to court and actually beat the case and set a legal precedent that pedal-assist bikes were legal.

We in some ways helped to initially legalize electric bikes in New York outside of a lot of the lobbying efforts and stuff like that we did, which yes, it was pretty wild. It was still a challenge. You could just think like somebody coming into the shop and say, "Well, we have these electric bikes just by the way, the law's not so clear on them," and all these things you have to talk with people about, which is not really so great in the selling experience. Several years later, New York officially legalized them and it's really had a lot to do with the push from bike share and they got bigger organizations working on this thing. Not always so easy to listen to the little guy, but I was doing it anyway.

Phil: Well done on that.

Chris: Thank you.

Phil: For taking on city hall, literally, as the expression is in America. In one of your videos, you say, "I just didn't quit even though I was feeling broken." What have been some of the biggest struggles for you? Is it the more typical business issues of cash flow and staff, or is it a broader burden of trying to change American society, which is so often pro-car and anti-bike?

Chris: People have a lot of different opinions about business whether it should be just straight business and not be about your passion, or whether it should be passion or where you should separate those things. I think that I tend to be on that side, that I just happen to be in a business that I'm really passionate about, and that could be really challenging. My emotions could be really tied to that. Naturally any business you have emotional ups and downs due to finance challenges or whatever the case may be. In times like COVID, it's even more challenging.

I definitely have taken some blows over the years. I think in things that I had hopes about this will happen. For example, the law change, this was a really big thing every year I'm going to Albany, the state capital in New York, and speaking with the governor's office, and doing some lobbying, which I had no experience doing, but this is what needs to be done and just do it, given test rides to politicians and that sort of stuff. Every year I was like, "Okay, it's going to pass this year, and then you have this thing, it doesn't happen." I said, "Wow. Gosh, I don't know. Can I continue on with this? I don't know." That's one thing, I just stuck with it despite all that.

influencers!

Changing Minds Changing Worlds

**CHRIS
NOLTE**



Eventually, what I decided to open another location in California, which was a really crazy idea, but there the law was more favorable towards electric bikes. In New York, it wasn't, and it was really challenging. I said, "Let me go out there and try it out." That's been pretty good. I mean, California's got its own challenges, but at least they've been pretty supportive of electric bikes. I did that, and funny thing is, a month later after I signed a lease out there New York, they actually fully legalized electric bikes. I don't know, maybe they said, "Hey, we're losing Chris [laughter] and I go back here."

Phil: I'm sure they did. I'm sure that was the reason they changed legislation just then. Paint a picture of your Propel business now, just tell me about how it looks, how many team members you might have, and what you do.

Chris: Propel is a very unorthodox business and really we respond to just the needs of the market or where I foresee the needs to be or what really I think is going to have the most impact, I guess you could say we're impact-led business in a lot of ways. As such, we have unorthodox team makeup. We participate in some unorthodox activities. For example, I make a lot of videos. I make a lot of YouTube videos, and this is a big part of my day-to-day work. Many people will say, "Well, that surely not the right job for a CEO of a company." I don't necessarily believe that.

I think that it's my job to really connect with the community, to inspire people, to educate people, whether it be my customers, other people in the industry, my staff, and I think that videos do a good job of helping to create that experience. We also operate in a strange way, as since we started in this business that's not really so focused on the hyper-local business. We're thinking more on a national and even global scale in that regard. We're spread out across the country. We have a lot of remote staff that work for us. We have over 30 team members now working for the company and it's a really great honor of all the people that I'm able to employ.

I see that as a new opportunity for me not just making these changes by lessening our dependence on oil, but actually also helping to bring meaning to other people's lives and helping other people to improve their lives through these amazing products that exist out there.

Phil: Are you actually selling more bikes via mail or beyond your New York and Long Beach shops than you are through your shops? Is that how your business works?

Chris: The business is really pretty unorthodox. A lot of it is online, but not really necessarily in the traditional sense. It's not somebody just going on the website and clicking and purchasing something. Before COVID, we actually had a lot of people that fly into our shops because we had a unique product selection and we're really focused specifically on this commuter and cargo, really car replacement type products. As such we're having a lot of interactions with people online and some of the sales might be completed online, some of them might be completed in-

influencers!

Changing Minds Changing Worlds

**CHRIS
NOLTE**



store.

We also have some vans that we do deliveries in a relatively large radius. We do a lot of different things. I will say more recently, New York has been pretty explosive in the growth that's going on there and the visions that I had 10 years ago about what New York might be like. It's actually starting to come true now. We're really starting to see a shift in that mode and the support for all stakeholders in that. That's really exciting inspire for me, and I'm just continuing to lean into that.

Phil: Now you call your sales team matchmakers. I don't think I've ever heard of any business in any industry that uses that term. Is that an original Chris Nolte invention, and why do you call them matchmakers?

Chris: I can't take all the credit for making up term matchmaking. It's actually a close friend of mine that worked with the company for a short time before he went to law school. He actually helped me come up with this term because this was just based on the type of selling that I was doing. It's educational selling. We don't sell bikes. We help people match to their right bike. I think a lot of businesses, they say, "Okay, this what we have, let me try to sell this to you." I don't think about it like that. I think about, what are your needs? Let me see if we have something that actually meets your needs. I think that's more like the matchmaking process. I think people need to change their minds about that.

Really, so many of our business practices are pretty unorthodox, and we don't think that, oh, this is just the way it's done, and I think how should it be done? How would I want it to be done? If you think about it in a lot of ways, the internet very much coincides with this type of experience and the way people shop online that they're not sold to per se. You can poke around, you can educate yourself, and we try to create a similar experience with our sales team where they're there more to support and educate the customer through their process of choosing the right bike for them.

Then we should try to help them in making an educated decision, really. I think that in a lot of ways, this is the future of retail though, honestly, or most sales in general. I think most people feel slimy in the traditional sales experience and nobody actually wants it, but if you don't have much choice, you'll just deal with it. If you had a choice, I think you'd prefer to just be educated and be supported.

Phil: Looking at the bigger picture in the USA, particularly your home country and your market that you sell in, where are we at now and what do you think it'll take for there to be a tipping point where the products you sell go from say, more fringe to more mainstream? When you've got, instead of city hall changing the rules for you, you might have Ford or General Motors knocking on your door for a few ideas.

influencers!

Changing Minds Changing Worlds

CHRIS NOLTE



Chris: There's loads of changes happening in America, and we're seeing it mostly in urban environments where the need for alternative modes of transportation is really critical. We have CO2, we have certain CO2 guideline that we're trying to lower emissions, that sort of thing, and improve safety by using multiple transportations are less likely to hurt or kill somebody. Popular, it's a contrary belief. Some people say, "Hey, you're going to get run over by a cyclist." I think the big threat here is automobiles. Not that I'm necessarily totally against automobiles, but they have their time and place and the urban environment is not necessarily that.

I think it's challenging for a lot of people to wrap their heads around what the possibilities are. I think COVID changed that a lot. Even if you think about it in America, I'm sure it's happened really throughout the world. You have like these streets got shut down, you have restaurants out in the street and different things like that. You hear people walk around and they say, "Wow, it's like Europe here." Say like, "Yes, it's not that complicated. We can make these little shifts and it's pretty amazing. We can actually see a lot of the benefits that these other countries have." They don't necessarily have to go all the way there to enjoy your space. That doesn't have to be just about passing through.

You can actually just be where you are. I think that's the big difference, and so the cultural mind shift is really starting to change. I think the internet helps a lot with that because we need to transfer ideas and it's not so easy to do that. Many of us are stuck in a bubble. We don't really understand our world much outside of ourselves, but I think we're really starting to see that. I think that the science is starting to really show what makes sense that, "Hey, these are real solutions that this is not just the toy as most people view bicycles in America. It's not just the product for sport." That's a big challenge we have to overcome. It's really a lot about rebranding the bicycle.

This is a phrase that I've been bringing up lately, and I think that that's something that's important because if you talk to somebody in many European countries that are using bikes for former transportation, if you ask them what is a bicycle? Is a bicycle a former transportation? Many might say yes. If you ask people in the United States, many people would say "No, bike is for recreation, for sport, but getting around I use my car."

To change that mindset, it's a challenging thing to overcome, but for me after tackling some of the legal legislation stuff, this is really the challenge, the next frontier, it's about infrastructure, building safer places to biking, building more access, and a better network of connectivity because the reality is, people won't do it if they don't feel safe. Sure, you're going to get-- Some people are going do it, but if you want to get most people out there, you need to create spaces that are safe for that. You're seeing the cities that are making those changes, it's increasing dramatically. Fortunately, as I said, I think on a national level, we are really starting to recognize that.

influencers!

Changing Minds Changing Worlds

**CHRIS
NOLTE**



I think we have some smart people in office that actually can see, “Hey, this is the real science behind it, and we can do this. It’s going to take a while, but if you have that vision and you stick to it, we can realize some great changes and people can really benefit from it.” One of the biggest things I see is that it can address so many things outside of just our transportation systems, but also, our ability to connect with each other, which I think is probably even more critical than that. I think that a lot of the challenges we deal with today are because we’re so divided. We’re always focused on, as they said, where we’re going as opposed to just where we’re at.

We’re not able to connect with people, we’re traveling around in several-thousand-pound vehicles where we can’t have that connection. You talk to anybody that rides a bike around or walks around, it’s a whole nother experience. Those serendipitous connections, I think that this is what we’re made to experience. Why not have a form of transportation that just creates that connection naturally?

Phil: Why not, indeed? What a good question. Chris Nolte, thank you for being an Influencer.

Chris: Thank you so much. It’s really been a pleasure to be here.