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Sunday, July 23, 2006

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Bike shop gets community involved

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By MELISSA KIM,

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Find your way to the back corner of a green cinder block building that belongs to the Biddeford Recreation Department.

Tires, tubes and tools fill every space along the low ceilings and peg-board walls.

The smell of bike grease perfumes the air. Bikes clamped on bike stands tilt like windmills. Pedals, brake pads, spokes and cables spill out of stacked boxes.

In other words, it looks like any bike shop's back room where bikes are being taken apart, fixed up, renovated, repaired and made ready for the road.

But look at the mechanics working on the little purple bike in one corner. Fiona Richardson and Emily DuBois are concentrating hard on the front brake as Randa Thomas shows them how to adjust the cable. Fiona and Emily are both 8 years old.

In another corner, Margaret Kathryn LaFountain, 10, and her mother Trisha are adjusting the handlebars on a bike (also purple). At a third stand, Gabrielle Gowell, 11, is working with Wendy Peaslee, 28, on the bike that Thomas rode in on this morning.

Welcome to Tuesday morning at the Community Bicycle Center's bike shop.

Tuesday morning from 9 to noon is Girls' and Women's CBC Shop Time, when any female can drop in to work on her bike. The girls-only morning is one of the new programs that Andy Greif, director of the CBC, is trying out this summer. So far it's proving to be very popular. After all, boys with tools can be a little bit, well, boy-ish.

The CBC is a shining example of one of Maine's few community bicycle centers, where people gather around bicycles to learn, share, help and grow. The stress is on community, not bicycle (put another way: "it's not about the bike"), as kids gain social, vocational, academic and civic skills.

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The Biddeford CBC began as an Earn-A-Bike program more than five years ago. After affiliations with the Northern York County Family YMCA and the Biddeford Recreation Department, this spring the CBC officially became its own nonprofit organization. The CBC's main mission is to "empower people through bicycles and bicycling experiences with a focus on youth development."

Greif says he needs to raise more awareness about the center and its programs and also raise more funds to keep the place alive. If enthusiasm and praise could be counted in dollars and cents, the CBC would be worth millions.

"This place is always bustling, especially during the after-school sessions," says Trisha LaFountain, "and Andy's a saint." Wendy Peaslee, a volunteer whose son and daughter both use the shop's services, concurs. "The only problem is that there are so many kids and only one Andy."

"Yeah," pipes in Gabrielle. "Maybe there's some way we can clone him." Her bike was broken for three months. She came to the CBC, fixed the brakes and patched a tube, and now she rides every day.

At the moment, she and Peaslee are waiting for Greif to show them how best to rebuild a back wheel; he's busy helping Margaret Kathryn adjust her rear brakes.

Greif's personality and efforts are clearly the driving force behind the center's popularity. He's patient, clear and soft-spoken; instructive but not patronizing. Through his networking with schools, social service agencies, after-school programs and other organizations, Greif reaches out to people from all walks of life, many with various challenges in their lives, to help them gain confidence, skills and, in some cases, transportation.

He offers an after/out of school drop-in bike maintenance and repair program, so that any kid can come in and work on a bike. One afternoon a week, he sets up shop at a local teen center.

There's an Earn-A-Bike mentoring program, a 12-week curriculum based program for kids and mentors to rebuild bicycles to give to others. There are group rides and a charity cycling team. And there are various community outreach projects. New this summer is the Bicycle Recycling Transportation Project, a program to make bicycles available to seasonal foreign exchange visitors and workers.

Meanwhile, Fiona and Emily are adjusting the reflectors on Fiona's bike. Randa Thomas, a volunteer, shows them the checklist of all the things they need to do to get the bike road-worthy.

Thomas explains the parts, tools and processes to the girls carefully and patiently. Every now and then there's a "Perfect!" or "Why are you handing the tool to me?" or "I love it when you can fix something without needing a new part." I'm not sure I've ever seen 8-year-old girls stay focused for so long.

These girls have come here to get a bike of their own and some knowledge. For the LaFountains, it's help with repairs.

"We have some tools at home, but we can never find them," says Trisha LaFountain. "Plus we don't have the expertise."

She and her daughter have borrowed a tandem bicycle from the CBC to ride in the Trek Across Maine each of the past two years. Today, Margaret Kathryn is working on her own bike to get it ready for another charity ride, the Lobster Ride and Roll in Rockland. No more tandem rides for her this summer; she says she is tired of looking at her mother's back.

Wendy Peaslee volunteers because both her son and daughter come here. She doesn't even have a bike of her own, but says she just wanted to come in and help out. "It's great for families," she says. "It's a way to spend time doing things together."

All this could be in jeopardy if the center can't stay afloat. Greif says he has enough to stay open until the end of the year or a little longer.

The CBC has major support from the Biddeford Recreation Department as well as grant funding, sponsorship through the Saco Bay Race Committee (the CBC is this year's beneficiary of the Saco Criterium bike race on Aug. 26) and other sources. He's working on funding initiatives and partnerships to keep the center going on a more permanent basis.

He takes a break from talking about grant writing to go help Fiona and Emily pump up Fiona's tires. Fiona picked the bike out from the center's stable of bikes. Bikes come from all sources - police departments, private donations, bike shops - and are used for various purposes. Some, like Fiona's, are available for purchase. She'll work on it and make all the necessary repairs and then will be able to buy the bike for a whopping \$5. She has a bike at home, she says, but it's too small for her. Emily doesn't have her own bike, so they hope to choose one for her next.

Once Fiona and Emily learn to lock the pump onto the valve stem and check the tire pressure, Greif continues.

Right now, he says, he urgently needs more storage space and is always looking for volunteers. So if you've got time or money or passion, consider helping the center out. After all, don't you want to help Emily get her own bike?

Melissa Kim, a freelance writer in Portland, is the author of "New England Biking: 100 of the Best Road and Trail Rides" (Foghorn Outdoors/Avalon Travel Publishing). She welcomes comments at:

bikes@melissakim.com

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