

[<< back to story >>](#)**Portland Press Herald Maine Sunday Telegram****COLUMN****This 25-mile ride gives cyclists a view and a cause**

The nonprofit Bike Shop in Portland schedules its first benefit Community Ride for Saturday.

By *Melissa Kim*

July 8, 2007

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Community Bike Ride

WHEN: Saturday, July 14

WHEN: Staggered start between 9 and 10 a.m.

COST: Donations are requested; you choose how much you can contribute.

Pre-register online with a credit card or bring cash or a check on the day.

WHO: The Bike Shop, 51 Mayo St., Portland

PHONE: 766-5920

E-MAIL: thebikeshop@yahoo.com

ONLINE: www.bikeshop1.org

There are so many benefit rides in the short Maine summer that it's hard to know which one to do. All are for great causes, and all take places in beautiful spots. Now, just to make it even harder, here's another one to enter the mix. The cause couldn't be better and the route is one of Maine's classics. So let me try to sell you on both.

The Bike Shop is a nonprofit project that introduces Portland's low-income kids to bicycles, cycling, bike repair and general responsibility, self-esteem and pride of ownership. For its first benefit Community Ride, taking place on Saturday, the organizers have chosen a loop that takes in the best beaches and lighthouses in South Portland, Scarborough and Cape Elizabeth. More on the route later.

Ask Director Matt Velguth when he opened The Bike Shop and he can tell you the exact date: June 10, 2004. "I just put a sandwich board out there," he says, "and a few dozen kids came in. The next day, a few dozen more came in. By the end of the summer, we'd served 280 kids, and it was up to 500 by the end of the year, all through word of mouth."

The shop, located in the heart of Kennedy Park, a subsidized housing area in Portland, has continued to serve about 500 low-income Portland youths every year. It's primarily an earn-a-bike program. Portland residents 18 and under can come in, choose a

bike, work on it, learn how to take care of it and repair it. They pay \$5 and the bike is theirs.

Besides helping kids earn, maintain and repair bicycles, locks, helmets and parts, Velguth also organizes weekly rides. In the summer, there are three rides for differing abilities as well as an impressive triathlete team. The rides take place all year round, no matter what the weather, and that's not Velguth's choice, it's the kids. "Even on cold nasty days, the kids drag me out," he says.

On a recent hot summer day, the stream of kids never stops flowing down the ramp into the cramped two-room shop, which is packed from floor to ceiling with bikes, bike parts, posters, maps, tools, bikes, helmets, tubes and an all-bike-part chess set. Some of the visitors are tiny girls with pink bikes. Others are hulking 18-year-olds with shock-absorbing mountain bikes. Some are first-timers; others come almost every day. Some look like athletes, most do not.

Velguth deals patiently with each and every one, handling conversations and tools like a master juggler, never dropping a ball.

He convinces one girl who wanted pink pedals for her pink bike that "the white pedals match your pink bike really well; pink ones aren't any better, they're just pinker;" explains how a drivetrain and gears work to a guy who says he "was never really good at math;" shows a girl how to use a new lock; and helps two kids register their newly earned bikes by taking down the serial numbers (in case the bike gets stolen), all at more or less the same time.

RUN ON GRANT MONEY

The Bike Shop is a non-profit project of the Alliance for

Transportation Choice. So far it has run largely on grant money and Velguth says he needs to turn the funding from startup grants into more stable direct donations.

"It takes about \$100 to support a kid for a year," he says.

There are no administrative overheads; he is the only paid staff person and he volunteers time outside the shop to work on myriad other tasks. The board is made of volunteers, cyclists volunteer to guide rides, and local bike shops pitch in as well.

The bikes -- in all shapes, sizes and conditions -- come from diverse sources. Goodwill donates bikes as do local police departments.

Local bike shops and clubs donate cash, goods, discounts and services, too. Last year, for example, Competitive Cycling Club of Portland (CCCP) gave the shop \$600 worth of helmets. On the day I visited, that meant that 9-year-old Kyle Veillette and 6-year-old Dylan Cote got to leave the shop with brand-new, safe, well-fitting helmets for \$1 (if they lose or wreck the helmets, though, the next one costs \$6).

"We just want more people to know we're here," says Velguth, "and to know that we have a local program that's really working."

The shop reaches all of its target audience and then some, and there are no plans to grow this shop. Instead, Velguth hopes to use this one as a model to start similar programs in other places. One reason he cites for The Bike Shop's success is the sense of ownership it instills in kids who would otherwise not own a bike.

"The community gets a lot back from these kids. For one thing, they'll be better drivers," says Velguth. The kids also are getting fitter and fitter in a climate of childhood obesity; they tend not to smoke; and they learn basic life skills.

The money the kids spend on bikes and parts goes into a shop kitty that Velguth uses to pay for ferry tickets, food and cocoa at cafes or coffee shops in winter.

"The kids can't believe it's all their money," he says. They learn how to save and spend wisely and how to behave in public places.

"It's designed as a preventive program," he says. "I want to help someone work their way to a healthy lifestyle and help them get things that might be lacking in their life, for all kinds of different reasons."

Bicycling also helps widen their horizons. "We help them get out of the routine of dependence," says Velguth. "We give these kids a chance to see a broader community than the one they might normally see." says Velguth. The group rides take kids out of Kennedy Park all around Greater Portland, to the Casco Bay islands, to Sebago Lake and beyond, all by bike.

This Saturday, some of the older or intermediate cyclists will be sporting their blaze orange Bike Shop T-shirts as they ride the classic route chosen for the Community Ride.

POPULAR 25-MILE LOOP

And so, the route: A lot of club rides do this popular 25-mile loop, and you can tweak or customize it to suit your needs. This is a ride suitable for advanced beginners ready for a little challenge. There are lots of places to stop and take a break, and it's also a good ride to do with those pesky out-of-town summer visitors.

The 25.8-mile-long route starts at South Portland's Bug Light Park and heads back down Broadway. Turn left on Sawyer Road (there's some hill climbing here), then right onto Cottage Road. Ride carefully downhill to the traffic light. Red's Dairy Freeze is at this tricky intersection; the route takes a left turn onto Highland Avenue.

Follow Highland for about 5.8 miles until you reach the junction with Route 207 (Black Point Road). Turn left onto Black Point Road and enjoy this gently winding road that takes you past the entrances to Scarborough Beach (on the left) and Ferry Beach (on the right).

At Mile 11.5, you'll come to the end at Prouts Neck. There will be a water station here on Saturday if you want a break (it's not a fully supported ride, but there will be orange arrows to mark the route and plenty of riders and volunteers who will fix flats or help out if you have problems).

Turn around and retrace your route for about 2.2 miles and turn right onto Route 77 (Spurwink Road). You'll pass Ocean Avenue, which gets you to Higgins Beach (a tempting side trip), as well as, on your left, the wonderful Higgins Beach Market with every kind of provision you could want.

The next important landmark is Crescent Beach State Park, on your right, and then the access roads to Kettle Cove and Two Lights State Park (yes, more lighthouses). If you need another ice cream stop, don't miss the homemade treats at Kettle Cove Dairy Bar.

More long stretches and gentle hills bring you to the center of Cape Elizabeth, where, at Mile 21, you'll turn right onto Shore Road. Enjoy the waves crashing onto the rocks at Smugglers Cove.

Then there's more hill climbing before you get to the entrance to Fort Williams Park and the oft-photographed Portland Head Light.

At Mile 21.4, turn right onto Preble Street just before Drillen's Hardware store. Follow Preble Street as it loops through this residential area, bearing right at the awkward Willard Square intersection (a right turn onto Willow Street will get you to Willard Beach, where there are public changing rooms and toilets).

BACK TO BUG LIGHT

At the stop sign, at about Mile 24, bear right onto Fort Road. In another mile you'll reach a stop sign amid the campus of Southern Maine Community College; turn left on to Pickett Street (heading straight will get you to the Spring Point lighthouse).

Ride all the way to the end of Pickett Street, turn right at the end and you'll be back in Bug Light Park with the aptly named Bug Light. Note: there are no facilities at Bug Light, so plan accordingly!

It seems to me like a big ride for a teen, but Velguth seems to think it'll be easy for his cyclists. In general, he says, "we have really high expectations for the kids. They are earning more than bikes, they are earning their own self-esteem. When we go places, we expect them to behave. And they step up to the plate."

Now it's our turn. Hope to see you on Saturday.

Melissa Kim, a free-lance writer in Portland, is the author of "New England Biking: 100 of the Best Road and Trail Rides" (Foghorn Outdoors/Avalon Travel Publishing). Her biking blog is online at outdoors.mainetoday.com/biking.

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