

The Front-Porch Mechanic

Days, now 72,
built his own
first bike at
the age of 9.

Since he retired 3 years ago, Lewis Days has rebuilt—

L
w
h
r
a
c
n

I
H
I
E

at

M

Lewis Days hears the question almost every day, when kids knock on the door of his three-bedroom home in Durham, North Carolina's Albright community to ask for help with flat tires, broken chains and crooked handlebars. Days, 72, has given a bicycle to nearly every child in the neighborhood, and now they look for his help when things break.

The kids call him The Bike Man, and, while Days often responds, "I'm just Lewis," it is a name he has certainly earned. Bikes have been a part of Days's life since he was nine, when he cobbled together his first ride out of parts collected from a

BY BRIAN FISKE
PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY PEARCE

chains would be rusted," Days recalls. "One day I decided, 'Well, you can't give them kids these bicycles.' So I started bringing them home and fixing them, then bringing them back." Days made an inventory of the parts he had on hand. He started a list—now housed in a well-worn spiral notebook—of kids in need of bicycles and the bikes they wanted. By the end of the year, he'd given away 50 bikes.

When Days retired from the Boys & Girls Club a year later, bikes began showing up on his doorstep, left by everyone from neighbors to the sanitation department. He set up two workstations—one on the porch for repair, one in the backyard for washing. A friend gave him a few bike-specific tools—a chain breaker, a spoke wrench—which Days used along with his hex wrenches and sockets from a previous stint as an auto mechanic. He gave away 150 bikes that year; these days, his house overflows with machines waiting to be repaired or given away.

"They're on the porch, behind the house, in front of the house, in the house," says Wayne Bostick, 50, a mixer operator for ConAgra Foods who grew up in the Albright neighborhood not far from where Days lives. "You can't find anyplace to sit. It's just his thing now."

Some recent publicity is taking "his thing" even further. Last fall, Days's story appeared in several local newspapers, which prompted a flood of support, from bikes to cash that Days used to purchase a few hard-to-find parts. A Chapel Hill Jaycees charity dinner for Days brought in \$840; he used that money to buy helmets.

"It used to be that I'd just tell the parents that they'd need to buy a helmet," Days explains. "Most of them wouldn't do it. But now if I see kids riding without a helmet, I ask them if they have one. And if they don't, I give them one." (Days's grandchildren, ages six and three, each have their own bikes—and their own helmets.)

Days says that, God willing, he'll be able to build bikes for a few more years, and maybe reach neighborhoods in Raleigh and Chapel Hill. "There's just something about when you give a kid something like that," he says. "It'll give you joy all over." **D**

DAYS KNOWS KIDS

HERE ARE HIS 6 BEST BITS OF ADVICE FOR TEACHING BIKE CARE.

1 "The chain is the most important thing," Days says. "You've got to take care of it." A little lube—and almost any lube will do in a pinch—is all it takes to ward off rust.

2 "If you don't have hex wrenches, don't even try to fix your bike," Days says. For kids, he recommends less-advanced equipment, like a pump. "If your tire is flat, your bike isn't broken," he teaches them. "Just pump up the tire."

3 The drive systems on cheap bikes are easily damaged by careless behavior. "I tell kids, 'Don't drop your bike on the side with the gears,'" says Days. "If you do, you're going to get everything all out of line and mess the chain up."

4 Give the bike a quick once-over before you ride. Squeeze the tires and pump them up if they're soft. Make sure the brakes work. And tug on the spokes to see if any are loose. "If you have a loose spoke, the whole wheel will wobble," Days explains—a potentially dangerous situation.

5 Kids do things with their bikes that don't always make sense. Days recalls one boy who bent the rear axles of two bicycles; when Days asked how the same problem could happen to two different bikes, the boy responded simply, "I don't know." So Days tries to instill the importance of bare-bones bike care, like not leaving a bike out in the elements—the root cause of his most common repairs. "If cables get wet and stay wet, they rust," Days warns aspiring shredders. "And if the cables rust, the brakes won't work and you won't be able to stop."

6 Helmets are a crucial piece of gear—but parents don't always enforce the helmet rule. When Days gives away helmets, he tells kids, "They aren't for you falling off, but if a car pulls out in front of you, you can't help but hurt yourself." —B.F.

WANT TO HELP? DAYS'S HOUSE MAY BE OVERFLOWING, BUT THERE ARE 5 MORE GROUPS BRINGING KIDS AND BIKES TOGETHER

Houston's ELVES & MORE (Bicycling Spin, Dec. 2004) uses cash donations to buy new bikes—last year it helped 20,800 kids. elvesandmore.org

Inspired by the success of Elves & More, Denver's **WISH FOR WHEELS** uses cash donations to purchase new bikes and helmets for graduating kindergartners. wishforwheels.org

Seattle's **BIKE WORKS** goes beyond traditional bike-maintenance programs with its Street Bummer club, a program that offers activities include mountain and BMX rides, building shops, and entry-level cash and bike donations. bikeworks.org

Boston's **BIKES NOT BOMBS** trains volunteers to help people buy bikes and helmets. It also offers bike repair classes and a lending library. bikesnotbombs.org

Atlanta's **CYCLEWORKS** provides bike repairs, bike washes, and bike safety classes. cycleworks.org

ditch where more-well-to-do children threw their broken bikes. But it wasn't until 2003, when he was semi-retired and working part-time as a van driver at John Avery Boys & Girls Club in Durham, that The Bike Man was born.

"People would donate bicycles to the club, and some of the bicycles would have flat tires or the

and given away—more than 300 bicycles.