

Bike Works Earn-A-Bike Grads Achieve Experience of a Lifetime

by Scott Marlow

For 26 years, thousands of cyclists have set goals to complete the Group Health Seattle To Portland Bicycle Classic (STP), a 200-mile ride often compared to running a marathon. The majority of participants have decades of cycling experience and ride sparkling special-loy bikes worth thousands of dollars.

On July 9 and 10, five teenage Bike Works Earn-A-Bike graduates (among the .6% of STP participants under the age of 18) rode alongside these seasoned veterans. The kids traveled on heavy, 12-speed road bikes they pieced together with decades-old components. The kids thought the concept was “crazy.”

In December, Tina Bechler, program manager, challenged a group of Earn-a-Bike graduates to bicycle from Seattle to Portland. From her experience, Tina knew the event was a “safe, controlled environment” to challenge kids. Tina hoped the achievement might change their perspective of the world and their views of how they can travel.

Training started in January with 20-mile rides every other Saturday. The rides slowly increased to 25, 35 and 50 miles. Winter rides against fierce headwinds made training

challenging at the beginning. Laughing, the group fondly remembers an early training ride when “Jonathan, going only 3 miles per hour, hit a stationary pole heading across I-5. We don't know what he was doing!”

By June, training rides escalated to 60-80-mile tours. When all five riders completed



Happy faces of the Earn-A-Bike team at the STP start line (above) and even happier faces at the finish line (right).



100-mile ride more challenging than the first day of STP—the group was not joking. They realized they might finish their first double century.

Twelve year-old Irene Muller describes the experience as “incredible.” Entering seventh grade, her longest ride before January was 15 miles. Skeptical at first, Irene enjoyed the training, and learned she could ride further than imagined. She rode a Trek hybrid bike that she worked on with Earn-A-Bike hours. She also learned to “conserve my energy and listen to my body's needs for food and rest.”

A 14 year-old Earn-a-Bike graduate attending Ingraham High School this fall, Jonathan Reingold had not bicycled more than three miles in a day before 2005. He

chain and other equipment that was not prepared for the intense, long workouts. Jonathan's pre-event anxiety turned to excitement at the start line. By the time he reached Portland city limits, he says “a huge adrenaline rush helped me push through the last few miles of uphill riding to the finish line. If you can feel good, stay positive, the miles will fly by.” He compares the experience to the 10-month preparation for his bar mitzvah.

Fifteen year-old Henry Jackson-Spieker, a sophomore at Aviation High School this fall, “loved racing others up hills” on a Trek frame that he built up himself. It was an experience he won't forget.

Gus Hoffman, 14, will be a freshman at Northwest High School next fall. His longest pre-2005 ride was “maybe 20 miles.” Next to sleeping in a comfortable bed, his most memorable moment was “coming into Portland and seeing the outline of the downtown buildings.” Gus agreed that

accomplishment. The experience has helped him overcome the psychological barrier of quitting, and he's in better shape now.

On Sunday, July 10, all five teens (Sam Hopkins, Henry Jackson-Spieker, Irene Muller, and Jonathan Reingold) successfully crossed the finish line into Portland, still surprised they finished. The team recommends training as a group. “Without the help of Tina and other volunteers, we would not have been able to complete the ride,” said Gus. Since many parents did not have bicycles, Bike Works' organized rides were the only consistent opportunity for students' training. But Irene cautions “beware of stationary objects!”

Not only was Bike Works able to provide a lifetime achievement for these five teens, but the program also developed camaraderie and friendships among the participants. Tina and Bike Works are “incredibly proud” of the young Earn-A-Bike graduates.

Cascade Bicycle Club waived the STP entry

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—Jonathan Reingold, age 14