

BIKES: Seeds of idea in Portland

FROM A1

tween Capitol Hill and Renton.

Bike Works is still focused on its original mission – putting bikes and mostly kids together, using that old-fashioned lubricant, elbow grease.

Want a bike? Or maybe one for Mom this year?

You can have it, but grab that wrench. Please.

The Earn-a-Bike program is fairly simple: Kids learn bicycle repair and then use their skills to fix other bikes, earning as they work enough sweat equity to acquire bikes of their own.

Just 24 solid hours at the repair stand is all it takes.

"You have to go over everything," Theo said. "The frame, the tires, the front hub and back hub. Also fix up the derailleur if it needs it."

It didn't start out this way in the minds of Lorch and those who preceded him in the project.

"We were this group of people who were just really excited about bicycling and wanted to make bikes more widely available in Seattle," Lorch said.

Their vision was something that might duplicate the "Yellow Bike Project" in Portland, in which old bikes were saved from the landfill, tuned up, painted yellow and dropped off around town free for the using, Amsterdam style.

That program fizzled initially and was later reconstituted as a non-profit community cycling program similar to the one now with headquarters on Ferdinand Street.

But first things first back then, Lorch said.

"One of our big issues was no location. You know, space. It was nice to have all our enthusiasm, but if we couldn't find a place to put it – a little space – well . . .

"So we started looking."

Just about then, Lorch sold his pedicab business and

Let's say I was actually able to come up with the funds to purchase the place," he said. "So I became a landlord and renovated this crummy little building to house the program.

"Columbia City back then was a bit more down and out than it is now," he said, "so we thought it would be the perfect place to start. It was an area that needed a bike shop, but it also was a community of less-advantaged people who had kids needing bikes – at least kids wanting bikes."

Lorch said the critical ingredient was Suzanne Carlson, one of the group's founders, the program's first executive director who is now in Chicago completing a master's degree in public administration.

As the shop's Energizer Bunny, Lorch said, Carlson organized the programs and thumped the drum loud enough to get attention, and away they went.

The raw material – all of it – is used and donated, such as the bike Bill Curry brought in Wednesday.

"My daughter's," he said.

He found Bike Works by letting his fingers do the walking on the Web. Just how?

"I put in 'Seattle and Bike and Donation,' or something like that," he said. "No. It was 'Donate Bike Seattle.'"

Annie Chan is a Highlands Elementary School fourth-grader who, at age 10, also is a graduate of Bike Works' elbow-grease program.

She has a BMX bike to prove it, she said.

Annie was the first to greet program manager Evan Dick at 11 a.m. Wednesday as the shop opened for business. Usually a day such as Wednesday – an off day for shop work – would be a "ride day," a chance to get out into the fresh air and pump those pedals.

But it was raining.

Dick, nevertheless, had things under control. As the kids showed up, he had them sew chunks of old inner tube into nifty coin purses, using small rings of bicycle bearings as buttons to snap the purses closed.

As he cut open an old tube to start the process, Annie was all eyes.

"Know how to sew?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "But it depends on what you want me to sew. Maybe you better show me."

So he did.

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