



Suzanne Carlson, program director at the Free Ride Zone Community Bicycle Shop, has a simple goal: Give everyone access to bicycles for their transportation and recreational needs. The Free Ride Zone offers opportunities for kids to learn bicycle repair and trade volunteer hours at the shop for a bicycle of their own. The shop is at 3709 S. Ferdinand St., in the heart of Columbia City.

Photo: Bradley Enghaus

More than just a bicycle shop The nonprofit Free Ride Zone provides a community service

By Cheryl Ross

In Columbia City there is a bike shop that is unlike any other in Seattle.

The Free Ride Zone Community Bicycle

Columbia City

Shop is a non-profit, small

business, which receives its funding from foundations, government grants and individuals supportive of the shop's mission to provide kids and adults with affordable bicycles. The store, at 3709 S. Ferdinand St., keeps costs low by working with volunteers and kids, who repair bikes donated by the community.

According to Suzanne Carlson, program director, the shop has a simple goal: Give everyone access to bicycles for their transportation and recreational needs. Carlson, a bicycle commuter, stays motivated because she believes biking is a good alternative to cars.

"[Bicycling] is better for your health, better for the gridlock and it's cheaper," Carlson said. She says that the bike shop is becoming more popular with parents and youths because the South End has been underserved for years.

"Before we moved into this building, there was no bike shop in South Seattle," Carlson said. "The closest bicycle shops are in Capitol Hill, Renton and West Seattle. People are excited because we took a storefront that wasn't being used at all, renovated it and put in a shop that they really wanted to see in the area."

The Free Ride Zone was incorporated as a nonprofit organization at the end of 1996. It soon began classes for kids ages 9 to 17.

Kids' Bike Swap May 8

A kids' bike swap is held May 8 from 12 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Geneva Park, 8101 South Geneva Street and 51st Avenue South. Bikes that have been outgrown can be exchanged for more appropriate sizes at this third-annual event.

Outgrown bikes will be traded for ones of similar value, but some payment will be required to acquire bikes of greater value. For those who have no bike to trade, used bikes may be purchased.

Used bikes may also be donated, but they must be children's bikes, with wheels no larger than 24 inches. Adult bikes will not be accepted for trade or donation. Those who wish to donate adult bikes may call the number below for instructions.

The Kids' Bike Swap is sponsored by the Free Ride Zone, 725-9408, with help from the Bicycle Dealer and concerned neighborhood parents.

"Our main program is called Earn-a-Bike," Carlson said. "Kids come in and

learn basic bike repair and earn their own bike by working on other bikes." Kids can enroll in the 8-week repair class to learn how to fix brakes, flat tires and wobbly wheels.

After their first classes they begin to repair other people's bikes while earning the necessary 24 hours of work time to get their own bikes. After students are finished with the class, they can continue to earn other bike parts. The next class is on April 27, and the cost is \$20. Scholarships are available.

Carlson says that this program not only allows kids to learn a skill but gives them a sense of pride for having repaired their own bikes.

"The kids feel the value of having earned the bike," she said. "There are a lot of kids whose parents can't afford to buy them a new bike. There are many parents who can afford it, but that doesn't always have the same value as if the kid earned it on his or her own."

"Even kids who start the program half-heartedly get really motivated when they pick out their bikes and customize, turning the bikes into something special," Carlson said. "It's fun to watch."

Staff and volunteers also conduct neighborhood rides with their students, as well as other students in public and private schools, community groups and day camps. Carlson says they teach safe riding habits,

▶ See WHEELS, Page 2