

Grant keeps the wheels spinning

FOR SEATTLE YOUTH

Dara Ayres knows financial and community support can be a big help when your mission is to inspire healthy habits in area youth. Ayres, executive director of Bike Works in Seattle and a recent recipient of a Children & Teens grant from the Group Health Community Foundation, is excited to be able to expand the services her non-profit organization provides and propel Bike Works in a new direction toward an enduring future.

Bike Works, established in 1996 and located in south Seattle's Columbia City neighborhood, serves low-income youth, many of whom come from culturally diverse single parent or immigrant families. The organization provides kids with unique opportunities to experience the great outdoors and engage in a physically active lifestyle - all while giving them the confidence and skills to bike 50, 150 or even 500 miles. Of course, none of this is without purpose or without challenge:

"In South Seattle we are seeing some of the highest rates of childhood obesity in the state," said Ayres. "So we have been trying to involve youth in cycling and other healthy activities. For some, their lifestyles and physical conditions are so unhealthy, they can't even get started. That's why we have new programs to reach those most at risk."

With the support of the Group Health Community Foundation grant, Bike Works launched its Introduction to Bike Touring camp (see sidebar) last summer and started a series of new year-round fit-

ness riding programs corresponding with the beginning of the school year. By June 2008, Bike Works hopes to enroll 45 middle school and high school aged young adults in five bike camps over the course of the summer and inspire 175 youth to participate in their year-round activities.



Participants in Bike Works inaugural Introduction to Bike Touring Camp prepare to bike to the ferry for their two-night camping tour on Bainbridge Island.

A portion of the grant will also finance a substantive, "outcomes-based" evaluation of the effectiveness of the new Bike Touring to Health program, an evaluation geared toward backing up success stories with real numbers.

"We know that we can help young people lose weight and feel better through exercise and learning about food," Ayres says. "We know we can help them develop critical think-

ing skills and self-esteem, improve their performance in school, and strengthen their ability to communicate with other students and family members. We know we are making a difference, but it's all anecdotal. Thanks to Group Health, we will be able to do a more systematic evaluation of our impact, and that is very exciting!"

In addition to sponsoring an organization-wide assessment and expanding the capacity and reach of Bike Works riding programs, funding from the grant will also be used to develop a business plan for the Bike Shop, which currently funds 55 percent of the organization's operating revenues through repairs, refurbishment and sales. ●